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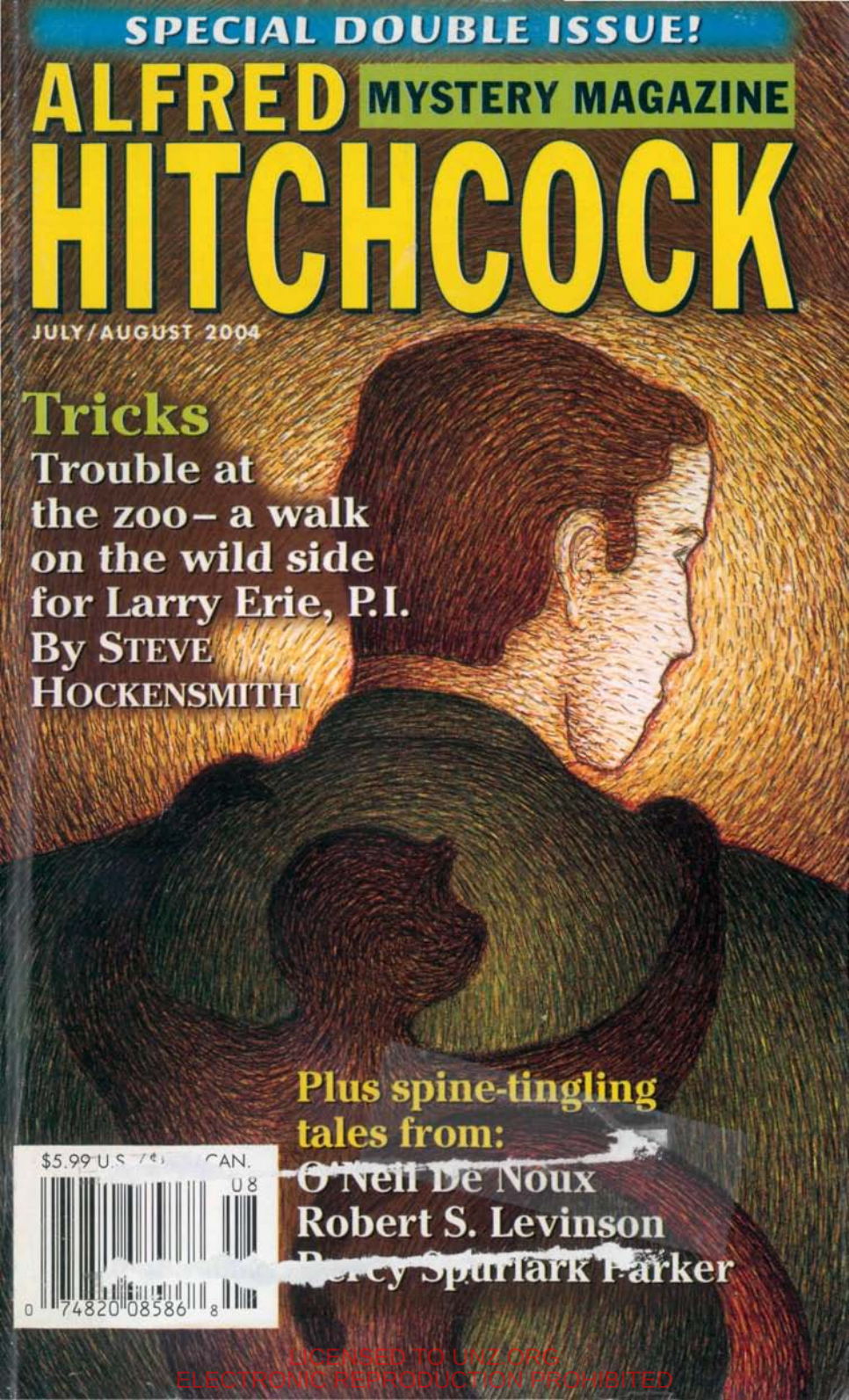

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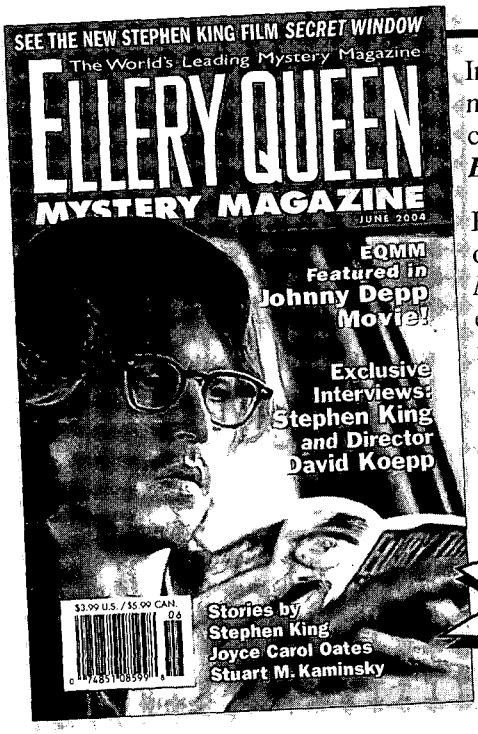
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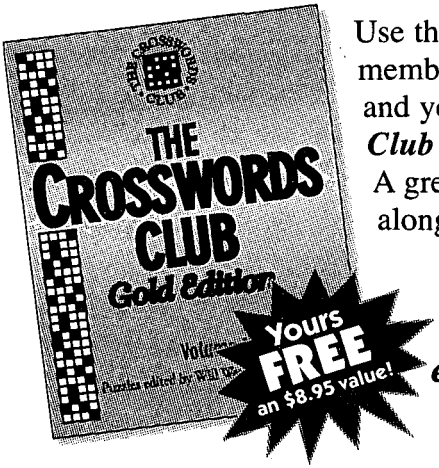

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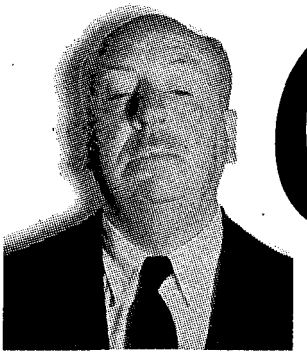

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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

CRIME AND PREJUDICE

Once again, our summer double issue gives us the chance to feature some longer stories and the opportunity to spend more time in the company of some interesting sleuths. Florida-based P.I. Bubba Simms returns in Mitch Alderman's "Burnt Wood" to look into a fire at a woodworker's shop for an insurance agency. Ernest B. and Alice A. Brown, a husband and wife writing team, introduce intrepid P.I. Valerie Dymond, who sets up shop in Boston in "Divorce Work." And Steve Hockensmith's morose P.I. Larry Erie is called to the zoo to handle a sensitive case, and finds himself handling people who have strong opinions, some about him.

While many mystery stories hinge on unambiguous guilt or innocence, several of this month's stories turn on questions of the reliability or unreliability of observation and the mind's ability to shape perception. Citizens of the French Quarter of New Orleans in O'Neil De Noux's historical "The Gorilla Murders" are terrorized by what they think they see. Two veterans argue over their memory of a shared experience in Vietnam in Scott Mackay's "Numbers." And Robert S. Levinson's story "The Hit" cleverly plays on the reader's—and character's—preconception of certain stereotypes.

New to the magazine in this issue are Norman Keifetz and Jaine Fenn. Mr. Keifetz, the author of "Twin Killing," is a semi-retired medical journalist from New York City, who wrote his "creative stuff mostly in the wee hours of the morning." Over the years he's published four novels (including *Welcome Sundays*, published in 1979), in addition to short stories and creative nonfiction. Jaine Fenn, from England, has previously published speculative fiction, but "Paying for Rain" is her first mystery story. She's been a computer consultant ("despite inherent technophobia") and is a historical re-enactor and costume maker. And for those of you who like puzzles, we are introducing a new puzzle this month, Mysterious Cipher, created by Willie Rose.

Criminal schemes may depend on deception and crime stories may rely on judicious misdirection, but you won't be misled here. We have twelve terrific stories for you to enjoy.

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TWIN KILLING

NORMAN KEIFETZ

First, Dr. Yuri Lemingov was transferred out of the epidemiology section of our institute and assigned to a lengthy study of hospital-acquired infection in a treatment facility in St. Petersburg. That was six months ago. Then Boris S. Berlin, a cheerful, optimistic guy, our expert in radiobiology, took a walk in a wooded area near his apartment, and somehow decided to take his own life, or so the police said. Questioned closely by the authorities, his wife finally admitted he suffered from bouts of depression, though who amongst us is free of that charge? But even in Russia if a group of highly respected doctors, like us, can describe you as happy, chances are you won't be killing yourself unless you suddenly find out you're dying of an incurable disease. Only a week after Boris departed, our computers crashed. Then the section's head statistician, Gregori Siminoff, was borrowed by the Armed Forces for "a few weeks," which turned out to be three months. Our study—years of blood, sweat, and tears, as they say—was in jeopardy of never being completed. We were all on suicide watch by then. Eight years of study was coming apart in borrowed and depressed bits and pieces.

It was at this moment that a Committee on Sport had been formed at our Moscow Health Sciences Institute to find, of all things, baseball players. The notice used the word *lapta* for baseball. At last something to laugh about.

If the idea of Russian baseball wasn't absurd, it certainly seemed so in mid April with temperatures hovering around freezing, too cold for baseball, or *lapta*. Many of us assumed the search for talent would freeze in the Moscow spring.

Wait! You've never heard of *lapta?* Well, it was new to most of us too. Turns out it is an ancient Russian game of bats and balls, and these days with baseball being dragged into Olympic competition, some cultural historians in Moscow have let it be known that *lapta* was played about two centuries before American baseball, early Russian émigrés having brought the game to the U.S.

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If they did, it was different from American and Cuban *lapta*. In the old days, the comrades staked claim to the genesis of things that were never Russian. The idea was to instill pride: the Soviets were first in space, that kingdom of heaven, first to explore Alaska, the first in tumbleweed, that is, Russian thistle, et cetera, et cetera. It's not done now. But the Committee on Sport believed that the historical Russian passion for baseball had not yet been properly rekindled, so they attempted to light fires under everyone.

The larger Committee, of which our institute is only a local splinter at best, was determined to find proud baseball players in the former Soviet Republics. As a measure of its success, over the past few years baseball teams have been formed by the iron and steel workers of Tashkent, the aviation institute of Moscow, the coal miners of Kemerovo, the fruit pickers of Tbilisi, and at least thirty others, all in the name of the competitive edge considered crucial to the new market economy.

If the idea of Russian baseball wasn't absurd, it certainly seemed so in mid April.

At the Health Sciences Institute, however, we are more colleagues than competitors. We are what you might call footstep followers. Most of our fathers were scientists and doctors. Medicine and science must have been in the air that we breathed growing up. In America we'd be called "Science Brats." For example, my father, Aleksandr Pedovich, was an embassy physician, first in Washington, D.C., then in Havana. We lived in the U.S. till I was eleven years old, then in Cuba during the early years of Fidel Castro. I wasn't quite fifteen when I returned to Moscow to prepare for my own medical education.

Of course, I joined the others in mocking the notice about the *lapta* talent search. When the actual call for tryouts was posted I pretended not to see it, no matter how much it glared at me each day from the hallway bulletin board. Nikolai Aleksandrovich, I told myself, you are forty-seven years old. You read William Wordsworth in English and Russian and you are well aware that after one's soul is kicked and bruised by life, it loses the ability to commune with nature or playing fields. You are now all brain, a giant egg with a stick torso and limbs. Baseball's not for you. I knew I could count on my cerebral colleagues to keep me from any foolishness. Besides, we were behind in our study, what with the losses of Lemingov, Siminoff, and poor Boris Berlin.

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Then, Yegor Kolchin, a research genius in our group and something of an athlete—good tennis player, skater, skier—came to me.

"How about it, Nikolai Aleksandrovich? Shall we go?"

"Go—?" I asked. "You've gone mad. We have the study to finish and we're so behind. Surely, the study is uppermost, no?"

"Stop. I know you, my friend. I've listened to you mock *lapta* much too loudly. I've seen the terror and longing in your eyes when you pass by the bulletin board. We've been to school together. I watched you throw and catch with the Cuban exchange students. It's *lapta*, Nikolai Aleksandrovich. It's in the gene pool."

Was he all wrong, my colleague, my former classmate at the university? Didn't Kolchin, a specialist in debilitating diseases, realize how much my hitting, throwing, fielding skills had atrophied? I hadn't tried to play in years. I was so rusty, I would creak.

In my youth I was considered a ballplayer with some natural talent, "for a foreigner." Coaches in both Washington and Havana always added that disappearing confidence booster—given with one hand and taken half back with the other. Still, my long-ago peers seemed to admire how quickly I learned to field and hit, and how I managed to add with some mastery the drop, slider, and the forkball to my high, hard one.

Even in the early days of Castro there were shortages and we schoolboys had to make do with secondhand baseball equipment. We played with balls made in Honduras and they soon got their covers knocked off. But my father saved the day. He wrapped them in surgical tape with such care and style that they looked, even if stitchless and very slightly ovate, almost as pristine as new baseballs, white and clean. When the tape shredded and dirtied my father would cut it away and recast it. "Products of my one-month cram course in the department of orthopedics," my father said, handing me five symmetrically taped balls, his pop-art baseballs. "Some will surely regret I became an internist." His wry wit was only outdone by his indulgence of me.

Because of the taped balls the Cuban boys called me *El Esparadrapo,* which meant "adhesive bandage." The *El* in front of the word is a term of respect or awe, something like *El* placed before the atmospheric phenomenon *El Niño.* They also called me *"El chico que tiró el esparadrapo,"* which I think is correct for "the kid who threw adhesive tape." My Spanish may be about as rusty as my baseball, but my ear and memory tell me I'm close.

That was then, this is now. At age forty-seven, I seemed closer to retirement than a baseball comeback. Besides, I had my slowly

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evaporating research study on cancer clusters in the population to think about.

"How can I blithely go off to baseball tryouts?" I asked Kolchin. "With Siminoff and Lemingov and poor Berlin gone, it's impossible."

"Yes, of course. You can't; if you did that I'd murder you," Kolchin said. "But we're open all night at the institute and, anyway, I've never seen you dash home to Lana in the middle of an investigation. You always see that your work gets done first, don't you?"

There was no escaping it. I was trapped, by myself more than Kolchin. Baseball tryouts at age forty-seven! Won't somebody spare me? But I knew I'd go, even if Kolchin stayed back. But he was eager, so I lent him my old Eddie Mathews glove from America; I kept the Bob Gibson model for myself.

Then just before tryouts, a rumbling, stoop-shouldered, craggy-faced man showed up at my office. He was a police investigator, Pavel Gusev, or so the identification that he'd dropped on my desk indicated. He looked even grimmer and older in his ID photo.

"Was Boris Berlin unhappy?" he wanted to know.

I shrugged, who's not? And then after reconsidering, I said, "No, maybe Berlin wasn't."

"Would somebody want him dead?" Gusev asked.

"None of us. We've got a study to finish. And he was essential to its structure. It's like losing a leg," I said.

Gusev scratched his head. I could see a dandruff dusting on the shoulders of his rather worn dark jacket, like the start of a light snowfall. Maybe he suffered from seborrhea.

"Now, your work here," he asked, "it deals with radiation sickness?"

"Why is that relevant to Berlin's suicide?"

"Well, I'm trying to get the picture to see where we're at," Gusev said.

"Yes, radiation sickness is the general category. Actually, we are trying to complete a study showing our country is now an environmental death camp as a result of Chernobyl and other radiation spillage at the military installations."

"You mean a condemnation of our former military comrades?" Gusev made an unhappy face.

"It bothers you?"

"It will bother them, no?" Gusev asked.

"So what? They made a deliberate decision to kill our people even as we breathed and ate."

"Um," Gusev said.

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"You don't like it? Too bad! Anyway, the point is not to condemn. You see, we think we found a way to precisely predict fatal radiation levels, and this could help us identify those in unsafe areas before disease overwhelms them."

"Ah, so now you are saying the old bureaucrats and apparatchiks of the right and left don't know whether to suppress your study or take credit for it. Just like we Russians still don't know whether to praise Gorbachev or bury him."

"Wait! You're suggesting something about Boris's suicide?"

"No, I suggest absolutely nothing, Dr. Pedovich. It's only the picture I want to round out."

"You'll have a struggle, Gusev. Most pictures are rectangular," I told him.

"If I can ask, Dr. Pedovich, who was the last one to join your research team?"

"The last one? Why do want to know that?"

He ignored my question. "Was it Kolchin?" he asked.

Why was he asking about Yegor? Did he have some reason to suspect him, my dearest, closest, and oldest friend? Was Inspector Gusev a lunatic?

"No, it wasn't Kolchin. Why even bring him up?"

"He's been urging you to play ball, hasn't he?"

"Oh, so you think he's trying to keep me from completing the study."

"And himself too," Gusev said. "He's trying out *lapta* with you, I hear—"

"Now I see what you think. Two key researchers preoccupied with *lapta*. But Kolchin's the spirit of our study. Why would he want to delay it?"

Gusev shrugged. Then he held up his hand and rubbed his thumb across his index and middle fingers. "Our new market economy," he said.

I sneered at the suggestion.

"And you can make yourself some *nal* too, Pedovitch," he suggested. He'd used the gritty street word, *nal*, for cash. There is an obsession about cash in the new Russia. It goes along with another obsession: graft—both for the giver and the taker.

"Don't be absurd. I'm the lead scientist. Why would I take a payoff to delay a study we've worked so hard and so long on?"

"Do you have everything your heart desires?" he asked. "And does Kolchin?"

So the absurdity grows, I thought. We're all suspect, if not suspects.

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Gusev rose, started his stooped amble to the door, turned. "Oh, so who was the last one to join your team, Dr. Pedovich?"

"Boris Berlin."

"Ah, Berlin. Interesting. And what did he do for you?"

"His job was to fine-tooth comb our case histories."

"I'm not sure I know what that means," said Gusev, still holding on to the door, unsure whether to stay where he was or come back in and sit down.

"He was the author of a highly regarded paper on false positives in radiation sickness."

"Oh, so he kept you all in line—"

"No, Inspector. He was not a policeman. He worked with us. The issue for all of us was accuracy."

"Ah," Gusev said. He turned to leave and quickly turned back. "I'll need to inspect Berlin's work station—desk, area, electronic mail. Is good? I can?"

"Yes, whatever you do, don't crash the computer."

If he's suggesting, as he seems to be, that Yegor Kolchin is our saboteur then this investigation was in the hands of a misguided incompetent, I thought. And what did he mean by "interesting" when I told him Boris was last to join? What significance did that hold? I started to shake all this out of my head. There was a study to finish and there was *lapta*. I didn't have any time for foolish police investigations!

I almost died when after three weeks of tryouts the names of the successful candidates were posted. Kolchin's name was there, not mine! It was incredible. Were they mad? I was clearly as good and maybe better than any name on that list. Kolchin was silent in deference to my chagrin. I was thankful to be spared his sympathy. I hadn't felt that depressed since a girl I loved madly in my youth ran off with a dolt of a fledgling bureaucrat. God, I felt low. But maybe it was good. I'd have more time for our study. I was standing there, still staring miserably at the candidate list, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. *Please, please don't let anyone commiserate!*

"Dr. Pedovich," the man who belonged to the hand on my shoulder said. I refused to turn around. I suspected it was Gusev or someone from his office. "I wonder if we could have a word in your office—"

When I allowed myself to turn, I saw one of the talent judges who had watched us play the entire last week. It was rumored he

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was with the National Committee on Sport, the closest thing to a "baseball scout" in the united republics. Or was he a specter of the old days, seemingly here to judge baseball talent, but actually snooping around to report on my scientific studies? Since Inspector Gusev had come around, I'd been growing increasingly paranoid.

"A private word," he said.

Did I perceive a sinister cast to his demeanor? I led him to my office. The hairs on the wolfhounds of my consciousness were raised.

"Can you take some time away from your important work here, Dr. Pedovich?"

"Absolutely not!" I barked. "I'm responsible for the study, the outcome."

"Why so emphatic, Dr. Pedovich? You found the time as study head to try out for baseball at the institute these past three weeks."

"That was different," I said, "it was just a couple of hours three afternoon a week—"

"We'd ask no more than that."

"We?"

"You're acting very strangely, Dr. Pedovich, I must say. Did you not know I was with the National Committee?"

"What?"

"Your name was kept off the roster of the successful institute baseball candidates because . . . we want you to try for the national squad. Eventually those chosen on the national level will represent their country in the Olympics. They will be trained by American, Cuban, and Japanese professional baseball instructors. Of course, if you are not successful, this local baseball institute would be delighted to have you back on its roster."

Were they really giving me a shot to make the Unified Team? Did they know I was in my forties? I noted with sadness that I couldn't even admit to myself I was almost forty-eight.

"At your age," he said, "it's an uphill climb. But I liked the way you played. So why not? I asked myself. Why not, Dr. Pedovich, eh?"

"But my work. I'll be away from the institute, my co-workers—" You never heard a protest so lamely made.

"We'll arrange for a car and driver to take you back and forth. The practice field is just down the road. With your arm you could almost throw that far. You won't be away much more than you were for the tryouts here."

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Such flattery. A personal chauffeur! In a matter of minutes I had moved from someone not on the list to courted talent. Would I be wined and dined next? I was honored—as excited as if I'd been asked to the Embassy Ball by President Vladimir Putin himself.

In the following days, I played hard at the national tryouts in front of advisers from Japan and Cuba, and an American coach named Gil Totten, who we learned had once played professional ball on a minor-league level in the U.S. for the Toledo Mud Hens. He now worked for the U.S.–Russian Trade Council in Moscow but had volunteered to help us train a team.

I was awed by the skills of the lithe young men competing with me. I doubt if there was one player over twenty-five years. Some of the men from my earlier tryouts at the Health Institute had thrown like girls; there was far greater skill and athleticism here. The players seemed energetic, faster than me; they had the power to hit the ball harder and for greater distance. But not many arms were stronger or more accurate from the outfield or the mound than mine. We were not assigned positions. We were moved about—outfield, infield, pitcher, catcher. When I took fielding drills I sensed my hands were softer, that is, better than many of theirs. I positioned myself well in the field. Of course, my age was indeed a problem. I knew what to do but couldn't always make my legs do it at the precise moment required. The others would soon be calling me Papa or worse—maybe Grandpa Pedovich. I was competing against the cream of the unified republics. Every day I came home more tired. When practice ended, I worked late at the Health Institute on our study. Once we lost the figures on a cancer cluster village near Chernigov in the Ukraine. Frazzled and tense for two days, I missed practice one day, came late the next. Then the computer awoke from its aphasia, offering up the missing figures. But I never thought I'd last. The coaches would soon find me out as a man with double dreams who woke in a sweat each night.

The woods where Boris Berlin took his life were not far from the tryout field. Occasionally, I would see Gusev trundling along. He'd been studying the woods for weeks. One day, I was getting into the chauffeured car to return to the Health Sciences Center when Gusev suddenly appeared. He hoped I would give him a lift back to the institute. I nodded. He hopped in—well, slumped in. He said nothing for the short trip back, and when I asked him how things were going, he only nodded.

"Find anything interesting?" I persisted.

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He made a gesture with his head, indicating the driver was in earshot.

When we got out, Gusev told me he did not think Boris Berlin had killed himself.

"What?!"

"You see, he could have taken his life any number of quicker, simpler ways, with any number of chemicals. Why would he choose to just slit one wrist? Surely Berlin would know that he couldn't lose enough blood that way because he would pass out and the wound might have clotted before it killed him."

"The wound probably did not clot, or he went into shock and died thereafter."

"Plausible, Pedovich. But there was no evidence of that at autopsy. And in fact, I found an area in the woods shortly after he was discovered that was still damp, and when I examined the soil, there was blood in it. This was about twenty yards from where his body was found. But there wasn't a trail of blood leading to it.

"And the significance of that is?" I asked.

"I think his hand was kept in a pail of water so the wound wouldn't clot. And then when he was dead, the water was dumped twenty yards away where I found the traces of blood in the soil. The blood I found in the soil was the same blood type as Berlin's."

When I finally got home after hours in the lab—some of it spent trying in vain to figure out who would want to kill poor Boris—I was exhausted. Lana was asleep. I finally got into bed and she awoke briefly to give me a smile and squeeze my hand. I told her that Gusev thought Berlin had been murdered. She sighed, closed her eyes. Perhaps she was not awake enough to think about it. I was sorry I told her. She might take the next step in her mind and imagine I might be in danger too. When I finally fell off, I had a terrible dream about masked marauders breaking into our lab, destroying computers and our telltale pathologic cancer slides. I was sobbing. Once awake, I realized I'd been crying real, not dream, tears.

On the ballfield, the coaches had assigned us positions. I was to compete as a pitcher against forty others. Only ten or twelve would survive. The way I looked at it, the assignment narrowed my chances. I was no longer in an amorphous situation where the coaches might keep me around as a situational bench player called in for the late innings for defense or to pinch-hit. My soft hands, my fielding skills, those things I'd considered my edge, had been

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taken away. Only getting batters out mattered now. It was a relief not to think about our study and poor Berlin and, if Gusev was right, the villains around us.

My pretty pediatrician wife, admired professionally for her skills with whining and irritable children, sensed something was wrong with her big child. Lana looked at me as she had so many times before. She'd take on a wonderful expression of sympathy that was, at the same time, comforting and reassuring. Her skills were especially masterful whenever a scientific paper of mine had been poorly received or rejected for publication. She had a knack for letting me spend my rage while she seemed to be joining me in taking arms against "that narrow, conservative scientific community."

"What, Nikolai? Is it poor Boris?" She too had taken to calling him "poor Boris." And why not? He was dead. But it was not poor Boris that was bothering me, I ashamedly admitted.

"I'm embarrassed to say it, Lana, but I don't think I could take being cut from the national tryouts," I said. "I'm just a pitcher now. I'm no longer in consideration for the eight other positions." I said the word "pitcher" in English.

"I think that's good," she said, "you'll be better focused. You'll have one direct goal."

"It means that they are trying to be nice," I said. "They want to be gentlemanly about cutting an older man. They want to do it slowly."

"I think it's the opposite. You were competing against two hundred; now it's only forty. You're just a Russian pessimist, looking on the dark side. First, you said you didn't stand a chance. Now three weeks have passed, and you're still a factor. You've already outlasted your pessimism by twenty-one days. Nikki, in those twenty-one days some of the players who were trying out with you have already been let go. Others are still unassigned. And you? You they've identified. You're a *picture.*"

Maybe it was Lana who gave me confidence. Maybe it was the fact that they issued us uniforms and spiked shoes. I don't know, but it just seemed to me that I was improving while some of the other pitchers were still playing at their original level. I was either getting better or they were regressing. At any rate, players who hit me before now had more trouble solving my curve or catching up with my fastball. The coaches looked happier to me. Even the American, Gil Totten, smiled at me as I passed him running laps in the outfield.

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"Pedovich!" He stopped me. "Is it true you haven't actually pitched a ball from a mound since you were fifteen years old?" he asked in quite good Russian.

I nodded.

"You been saving it up for us?"

"It's been banging on the door for years, wanting to come out, I guess," I answered.

"I think we unleashed a monster," he said in English. "We'll see if it scares the Cubans."

"Cubans?"

"Some of the Cuban Olympic team will be here this weekend. We want you to pitch."

"Pitch?" I asked stupidly. I was stunned, shocked. "How long?"

"Three innings or ten runs, whichever comes first," he said.

I wasn't sure if he meant to be funny. The Cubans were the best, better even than the Americans and Japanese.

"Is this to be my swan song, Mr. Totten?" The coach was about my age.

"Maybe. The Cubans are good enough to make mincemeat out of you. But if they knock you around, it'll still be early in the game. Who knows? Miracles have happened. We might come back, turn things around like your people did against the Communist Party." I was still too stunned to react to amusing analogies from Americans.

"Early? What do you mean *early* in the game?"

"Well, you'll be the starting pitcher, Pedovich."

"They want *me* to *start!?*"

"Right, pal. You got the job," Totten answered as he walked away. Then he turned. "Good luck, Pedovich. Stay cool. You'll do fine."

Yes, I had butterflies. I vomited the morning the Cuban team showed up. I hadn't thrown up when I heard about poor Boris. Lana did give me something to settle my stomach. "The way I feel," I told her, "you'll have to feed me an intravenous net to get rid of these butterflies."

She kissed me and sent me off. "To the gallows, my love," she said. I think she was telling me that she loved me even with my head in the noose. I think she was trying to relax me. She was so good at dealing with anxious children. Maybe she was worried about what happened to poor Boris Berlin.

I watched the Cubans practice before it was time to go down to the bullpen and warm up. I saw clearly that they could do

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effortlessly what we did clumsily at best. We would not do well against them.

When it was time to play, I threw three wild pitches at the first batter, walked him with the next. Then, I managed to walk the next two without wild pitches. Their next batter doubled in three runs. It was the first inning. Nobody was out yet. Only seven more runs till Totten came to get me out of there. The way I was pitching I estimated that it would take about five minutes to end my misery. I ran the count to 3-2 on the next batter, and then he swung and missed a curve that would have been ball four. The next batter popped the ball up. Two out. I got wild again and walked two more batters. The bases were full of Cubans again. I couldn't rid myself of the butterflies. For some reason the next batter swung wildly and missed three straight pitches—a curve, a hard curve, and a soft curve. Finally I was getting the hang of it. I kept moving the curve farther and farther off the plate so their bats couldn't reach what must have seemed like a big lollipop they could smack to the outskirts of Moscow. Totten gave me one thumb up as I walked off the mound. Then, as I passed the Cuban dugout, I thought I heard someone call *"El Esparadrapo!"* I looked around. One of their coaches, a man my age, tipped his baseball cap. He said goodnaturedly in Spanish, "You're too old for this game, *El Esparadrapo."* Clearly, he had to have been a part of my past, a boyhood friend from Havana. He walked up to me. *"Te conozco. ¿Tú eres él que tiro la pelota envuelta en esparadrapo no?"* He recognized me, asking if I was the kid who had thrown the balls wrapped in surgical tape.

I remembered him with some effort, then Jorge Perez-Luna and I embraced. Perez-Luna said that at his age he was coaching, while I was still doing it to the Cuban hitters. We talked some more about the old days in Havana. I found he'd never left baseball and was now a professional coach in the Cuban baseball leagues. I told him I had gone into medical research, that this effort was just "a lunatic diversion." He asked if my father still taped the baseballs. I answered that he gave that up and was nearing retirement as chairman of internal medicine at the medical school in St. Petersburg. Jorge's father had become the chief judge. He had been a lawyer in the Cuban Department of Justice when I was in Havana.

"This man, Boris Berlin, the one who worked with you, the one who took his life," he asked in Spanish, "he was a spy?"

"No, he was a doctor," I answered. "Why did you ask?"

"I met him once in Havana. I was with my father. My father told me privately he was KGB."

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"Impossible! He worked with me."

"Yes?" Jorge said, "Perhaps I'm mistaken. Maybe it was someone with the same name, who looked something like him." It is in the Latino nature to be polite to *amigos*, to pull back, soften, even if you knew you were right.

Berlin a spy! I should have been more shocked. But, you see, it was time for me to take the mound again. In the few minutes that we had talked, our Russian team had made out one-two-three. Perez-Luna and I arranged to have a nostalgic evening together very soon. Then, when their first batter popped out on a fastball, I saw a stirring on the Cuban side. They began to buzz when I got their second batter to hit back to me for an out. But life just isn't that beautiful. The next batter launched my forkball into outer space. It was 4-0 Cuba. A long double followed that shot. Totten came out to talk to me. The Cubans thought he was going to take me out. And I heard a chant growing from their side. *"El Esparadrapo, Si! El Esparadrapo, Si! El Esparadrapo, Si!"* They wanted me to continue. It was clear Jorge Perez-Luna got them up to that.

"What's that el sparrow drop-o-see stuff?" Totten asked.

"It's their name for me. It means adhesive tape," I answered. "But in this case I think they don't want you to take me out."

"Your curve is working. Give them the curve. Extend the strike zone, Pedovich. Make them stretch. Force them to reach for it. Keep away from the middle of the plate, work the corners and up and down, change speeds." He walked away.

I went back to the curve, and got the batter to hit a tapper back to the first baseman for an easy ground ball out.

We made out again like trained laboratory rats in our half, and I walked back to the mound. I threw curves and watched two batters wave at balls that were in the dirt and far off the plate. Both had struck out. The next batter blasted a hanging curveball for a home run. The score was 5-0. Another curveball produced a ground ball out.

As batters we were still rats on a treadmill going nowhere again. Our finest moment, and mine too, was when I was asked to go out to the mound for one final inning, and got the Cubans one-two-three—the last a strikeout, all on fastballs. And now our side was shouting an approximation of *El Esparadrapo!* and *El Esparadrapo, Si!* in a Russian accent. And I was surprised to see Totten give me a thumbs up and a big smile again. After me, our pitching woes continued. We were humiliated 33 to 0. However, there was a plus. I had gotten my old name back—*El Esparadrapo.*

Gusev had been at the ballgame, or at least he appeared at the

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end. I was heading to the locker room when I saw him looming before me.

Oh no! I thought. Can't I have two consecutive minutes of peace and comfort?

"About Berlin . . ."

"What!?" I almost shouted.

"I'll tell you the truth, Pedovich, Boris Berlin had been planted on your study team by military intelligence. Clearly to derail it or slow it down. I don't know if you ever knew but he had worked with the KGB."

"Don't tell me. In Cuba, right?"

"So you knew?"

"No, I only just found out from a Cuban bench coach."

Gusev gave a small smile. He thought I was being funny.

"The nice thing about Berlin is that he developed a conscience working on the study," Gusev said. "But the bad thing was the military had no choice but to eliminate him."

"I hope you're going to nail them to the wall!"

"There my hands are tied, I'm afraid," Gusev said. "I'll have to leave that to you."

Figure that out! I thought.

The next morning, returning to the reality of the institute, my colleagues were waiting. I walked in to sweet applause. I was pleased. They held up a newspaper. A report of the exhibition game already? Kolchin read from *Pravda:*

" 'MOSCOW—A group of cancer researchers headed by N. A. Pedovich of the Health Sciences Institute may have found a way to predict which communities will be affected by radiation from Chernobyl and military installations. The extensive epidemiologic findings, which will be published shortly, may eventually help save the lives of citizens, according to an inside source.

" 'In their study the investigators began with a gloomy quote from a former Soviet Minister of Health: If you want to live a long life, don't breathe, drink the water, or eat. Dr. Pedovich and colleagues then set down a laundry list of horrific radiation disasters wrought against the people in cities, towns and villages across the Republics, as well as the outline for a plan for survival . . .' "

"My God," I said, "we're celebrities." But I wondered. How did this get out? We haven't published yet. Who was the inside source? Had Boris left a suicide note?"

Applauding, we hugged and pounded each other on the back.

Of course, the leak of our study to the press came from a very

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shrewd man who rummaged through our files while investigating a suicide. Though Gusev knew he'd hit a political wall in the murder investigation, he was determined that there would be a payback for poor Boris Berlin.

Boris was a brilliant man, and attuned to the realities of Russian life. Like Gusev, I saw him as a man of conscience despite his past.

My scenario for his last hours differed from Gusev's. Boris knew he was done for when he refused to go along with the commissars' orders, when he refused to sabotage our study. I think he made his own suicide look like a murder, staged the spilling of the bloody water twenty feet from where he died. I was almost sure that if they examined Boris's body again they'd find he'd taken a chemical that induced hemorrhage. He didn't need to keep his wrist in water to prevent clotting. His wound couldn't clot. Boris only wanted the police to see the scene as Gusev had, so the "murder" would point directly to the commissars in Military Intelligence. It was clear they threatened to kill him. Maybe they were on their way to take him out when he was in the woods planning his payback.

Or maybe Gusev was right. Poor Boris. I sighed.

Later, in my office, my eye caught a brief notice reporting that the Cuban team had beaten the national baseball team 33-0 in a game that lasted for seven of the nine scheduled innings. "Nikolai Pedovich was the losing pitcher." Stated that way, the report made it appear that I had given up all thirty-three runs. Obviously, there was no mention that Gil Totten had given the "thumbs up" sign to a forty-seven-year-old egghead who had struck out five Cuban stars and would go on to experience the best twenty-four hours of his life.

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PAYING FOR RAIN

JAINE FENN

"He says: Rules don't hold on the mountain."

"Fine. Whatever." Jamieson shaded his eyes and gazed out across the valley. "So is this a money thing, an offerings thing, or a respect thing?" He dropped his hand and turned back to his two companions, flashing his best appease-the-locals smile at the aged Aymara native before addressing the man who had spoken. "No, don't translate that, Francisco. It's just that we've been following Angelo here over hill and dale for three days now without any clear idea when I'm going to be 'allowed' up the mountain—or even which mountain—and I'm getting a bit tired of being led round by the nose. So can you just ask him nicely whether he could please explain exactly what it is he needs now."

Francisco nodded, his face expressionless as ever, and started to speak rapid phrases in the Aymara language to their guide.

Jamieson had first met Francisco a decade ago, when he'd been covering South American hiking holidays for *Western Cultural Traveler*, a publication he still thought of as National Geographic Lite. Fresh out of college, he'd thought he'd pulled a peach, but it had turned out to be a thoroughly unpleasant assignment. Basic accommodation, gritty food, surly locals. Well, except Francisco. And his lovely sister, of course. Presumably she'd never mentioned what had happened that night during the thunderstorm to her brother, or Francisco might not have been so eager to renew his friendship with Jamieson when he'd turned up in La Paz last month looking for a guide. But now Jamieson was freelance, on his own timetable, and on a more lavish budget. He just hoped the rewards were worth the effort.

While the two Bolivians spoke, Jamieson turned back to the view. They were on the Cordillera Real, easternmost of the monumental ridges that form the Andes. The only signs of life in the

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valley below were the dirt road he and Francisco had driven up on, a few clusters of simple stone houses, and some halfhearted terracing along the lower slopes. Further up, the brown-gray crags were relieved only by drab patches of scrub and occasional wisps of low cloud coiling round the valley walls. To the west, Lake Titicaca shone ethereal and distant.

"Señor Jamieson?"

Jamieson turned back to the two men. Angelo was favoring him with his impressive grin. When Jamieson had first been introduced to their guide he'd expected the gap-toothed smile of a man brought up in a culture that had no word for dentist, but Angelo had a full set of perfect—presumably false—teeth.

"Señor, Angelo says he only warns you of this as his duty, though since you mention offerings, more alcohol would be good. But, he says, a gringo like you will have enough trouble carrying what we have all the way up the mountain." Francisco gave a slight shrug, distancing himself from his countryman's insult. "So, if more is needed, money will have to do."

Jamieson tried not to grimace as he held Angelo's moist-eyed but steady gaze. "Sure. Tell him we'll manage with what I've got. It should be enough."

Money would usually do for the fabulously poor peasants of the Bolivian highlands. And more was usually what was needed.

I am so cold. I would have thought, being nearer the Sun, that it would be warmer up here, but that was just another of the Sun-Priest's lies.

On the way up I saw the whole of our Valley from above, as though I were a Condor. The fields and terraces looked like a patterned shawl draped over the land. Even when we were too high to make out the houses anymore, I could see the way they pulled on the pattern of fields, like a thread catching in cloth. I saw right across the Lake of the Cat and into the mountains beyond. Everything I have ever known, and places I had only heard of, all laid out below me.

So beautiful. So small.

Will they miss me, my mother, my father, my brothers? They will say I am with the gods now, in the arms of Father Illimani. But when visitors come and ask, they will have to be careful and say instead that I am with the Sun.

"Can we take a break?"

Francisco turned at Jamieson's request, inspected him for a moment, then shouted ahead to their companion. Jamieson liked

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to think of himself as pretty fit, and he hadn't wanted to give in, especially as it looked like this mountain might finally be the one. But then again, he wasn't used to exerting himself in air so thin his blood felt like it was evaporating from his veins.

Angelo and Francisco came back down, Francisco at his usual measured pace, Angelo bounding over rocks with an agility that belied his advanced years and heavy backpack. Jamieson eased his own rucksack off with a sigh and sat on a rock spattered with yellow lichen. Angelo said something to him in Aymara, his dark eyes twinkling in his leathery face. It sounded like a question. Francisco translated, "He asks, are you maybe having trouble with the height here?"

"As a matter of fact, yes I am." This was something new. Insofar as he acknowledged his existence at all, Angelo seemed to regard his patron as a fount of money and a source of amusement. Sympathy was a new development.

"Then we rest," said Francisco, sitting down. Angelo accepted Francisco's decision, though he did not sit, and instead looked out over the valley, whistling tunelessly. Jamieson was glad that Angelo seemed so happy to go along with Francisco. The ex-policeman and amateur archeologist seemed to know everyone in the region and even claimed that he was distantly related to Angelo, though Jamieson found it hard to see any resemblance between the tall translator in his immaculate lightweight suit and panama hat and the wrinkled semi-alcoholic local in his ragged poncho and hand-knitted cap.

Angelo stopped whistling and turned back to his charges. He said something, another question by the sound of it.

Francisco translated. "He asks whether you are really a storyteller?"

"Not exactly. I'm a reporter, as you know." Like Angelo would know what a reporter was. He probably couldn't even read. "But for the sake of this conversation you can tell Angelo that yes, I am a storyteller."

Angelo and Francisco had a short conversation—possibly an argument, though it was difficult to tell with the weird cadences of the Aymara language—and then Francisco said shortly, "Angelo says that he must now tell you a story." Angelo had already sat down cross-legged on the rough ground and started to speak, while Francisco translated.

"This is not the first time that the Sun and Rain have been out of balance. It has been so many times before. Once, in such a time, the chief of this Valley had a son who was both wise and beautiful. Some say he was the fairest child ever born in the Valley. He was so perfect that the King of the Sun heard of his beauty, and

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asked that he be sent to his Court. But the people of the Valley did not yet acknowledge the King of the Sun, and they refused to send the child."

Angelo stopped talking and addressed Francisco directly. Francisco shook his head, and Angelo reached into his poncho for an unmarked glass bottle, no doubt containing *chicha*, the local cure for sobriety and a functioning liver. Angelo extracted the cork with his teeth, took a mouthful, then spat it out, spraying the foul liquor over Jamieson's feet and the surrounding countryside. The first time Jamieson had seen him do that he'd laughed; *chicha* was made of rotted corn and human spittle, so he could understand the reaction. But this was Angelo's drinking ritual, and after messily offering the booze to the local vicinity, he proceeded to take a long swig.

Jamieson took the opportunity to check his watch: just gone three o'clock. He hadn't realized it was so late. He had been hoping to get up and down again before they lost the light, but at this rate it looked like they'd be camping on the mountain tonight. He started to get up, but Angelo waved a warning hand, and Francisco said, "The story is not finished yet."

Jamieson's heart sank. He didn't have time for this. Carol had been the one for stories; she'd happily spend hours crouching in a smoke-filled hut listening to some unwashed shaman droning on about how the world was created from a corn stalk and a lump of goat poo. Right now, she was no doubt collecting or collating the meaningless tales of some primitive culture, though since the divorce she'd probably have to settle for driving her beat-up car to the local Indian reservation. Hey, it wasn't his fault that she was a snob who saw anthropology as an entirely academic pursuit and refused to acknowledge the increasingly popular appeal of the subject. He'd take fame and fortune over poverty and elitism any day. And he had always made it clear that he wanted children, so if she chose a badly paying career over family, she'd just have to live with the consequences. Of course, he was grateful to her for kindling his interest in mythology and ritual, even if she had been unable to see the commercial potential. Treasure and murder: that's what sells books and gets documentary tie-in deals. Jamieson knew he'd be lucky to find much treasure, but he'd settle for a little murder.

Angelo had started up again, his voice slightly slurred. Francisco translated, his expression looking as close to disapproval as Jamieson had ever seen it.

"The King of the Sun was angry, and he threatened to send soldiers. But the boy said to his father, 'Father, there is drought here.

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The Mountains are angry with us, the old gods are angry with us, and the Lake will not give water to the sky unless we feed the earth. Tell them that though I will not go to the City of the Four Quarters, they may send a priest, and we will do as he says and make obeisance to the Sun. To the eyes of their priest, we are obeying them. But the sacrifice we make will be the one we have always made—to the Mountains, not to the Sun.' And so the boy's father sent word to the King of the Sun, and he sent his priest. After the preparations had been made the priest and the boy went into the Mountains. The priest, thinking that the Aymara were scared primitives who would not dare disobey the King of the Sun, did not stay on the Mountain long. Believing that the child had gone to be with the Sun, he left the people of the Valley in peace. But the boy had fooled everyone. Left alone at the last, he had not let the Sun burn and wither him; instead he had fed the earth to make the rain, as it always has been. And so the drought was broken."

Jamieson smiled at Angelo. "Nice story." He turned to Francisco. "What exactly does he mean by *fed the earth*, Francisco? Are we talking human sacrifice?"

Francisco said curtly, "These tales are not literally true."

"Well no, it's just that this kind of stuff might be useful for my book. Obviously artifacts are the main priority, but if I can tie a story to the place, that's a bonus."

Francisco waved dismissively. "It is a story I have heard before. If you like I will retell it for your tape recorder when we come down off the mountain."

"Yeah, that'd be great." Jamieson started to get up. "But time's getting on and we really need to—whoa." Jamieson staggered for a moment as dizziness washed over him. Though they were on relatively flat ground, he felt as though he was being pulled off the mountain by the vertiginous drop to the valley below.

Francisco took his arm. "Señor Jamieson? Are you all right?"

"Yes, it's just the altitude. I'll be okay."

Angelo thrust a bunch of greenery into Jamieson's swimming vision.

"He says this will help."

"What? Coca. That's coca isn't it? No thanks. Already met this one's descendants. I don't do that shit anymore."

Francisco let go of his arm. "It is not 'shit,' señor. Not at all."

"Okay. Whatever. But I don't do drugs, right?"

"Not drugs. Coca. This will help with the altitude. It is not the same as the white powder."

"I'd rather not."

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"Angelo says you must." Jamieson hadn't heard Angelo speak over the roaring in his ears. "If you do not chew the leaves, you will not be well enough to climb the peak today." Francisco dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "And as you said yourself, señor, there is a good chance that Angelo may change his mind again, if we do not carry on now."

"Good point. So, I just chew them?"

"Yes, chew and swallow as much as you can of the juice."

It felt like chewing string dipped in weed killer, but within a couple of minutes the trembling in his limbs gave way to a kind of enervated thrumming and the pounding in his head subsided to a manageable level. For the first time since they had climbed above twelve thousand feet, he felt that he could draw breath and actually get the full benefit of the oxygen in his lungs.

"Let's go."

They will hold a feast tonight. Father killed his best llama. The Priest smiled smugly at the sacrifice, though he frowned a little when Father poured blood from the bowl onto the earth. It was a sleek, healthy animal, and when the Priest has had his share there will still be plenty of meat for everyone.

I wish I could stop thinking about food; it is terribly distracting. But I am so hungry. I have not eaten for two days, as part of the purification; another practicality disguised as mystery, leaving my body empty and receptive to the final, bitter cup.

I am not angry with them. There is no fury in me. I know them better than they know themselves. My father is a good man, but he worries like a woman. And my brothers are not fools, for all that they have been content to live in my shadow until now. My family will manage without me. The Valley will manage without me.

It is not a blessing to see into men's hearts and know that the truths we live by are merely our own inventions. I would have been happier to live in quiet ignorance. But we have done the right thing, all of us, according to our beliefs and needs. There is no room for anger when you are true to yourself.

Ah, the poison is rising. I cannot . . .

"What the hell is that?"

"What, señor?"

"There, down that ravine. It looks like a cola bottle!"

"Yes, it could be."

"What do you mean, *It could be?* I thought this was an unclimbed mountain." The coca had left a bitter taste in his

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mouth but had suffused him with energy. It lacked the compulsive certainty of cocaine but it still had the anger in it, the old anger he knew so well.

"Unclimbed by any gringo, yes. And rarely climbed by others. The Aymara do not climb for sport, señor."

Further up the slope Angelo stopped to watch them, his head tipped to one side.

"How about graverobbing? Do they climb for profit, if not for fun?"

"What do you mean, señor?"

"I mean, how do we know that none of the Aymara have thought to rob out the tomb? It's not like they couldn't use the money."

"We cannot be sure. But the tomb is not generally known about. I believe it is not even visible unless you know exactly where to look."

"And Angelo does know, does he?"

"So he says."

"Well, I guess that will have to do."

I must smell terrible. I tried to keep my retching quiet, in case the Priest was still on the Mountain, though I doubt he would have heard me through these walls of stone. And now I am covered in the remains of the "sacred drink" he gave me. Foul stuff, intended to steal my will and wits and leave me waiting meekly for a slow death.

While I wait shivering in my cold stone box, I try to preserve the memories of my loved ones, or to focus on Arhua, on what she is doing for me; but the face I saw as I vomited over my robes was that wretched Sun-Priest. He is not much older than me, but he yearns for power, and he will do anything to get it, even travel through inhospitable mountains to minister to savages like us. The people were so reverent, so careful to appease him. But behind his words of acceptance and grace he despised us. We are foreigners, not true subjects of the Empire. He is right, of course. The Sun-King is mighty, and he has the power to bring peace. We are just peasants, living in our little Valley, farming the land, revering the Mountains and the Lake. They are clever, the Inca. They claim their lineage comes from our Lake, from a Mother and Father born from our sacred waters. We think we are special to them, because we live in a place they hold sacred. So, we will obey them and send them tribute of wool and maize and children. Father does not dare disobey them, even though he loved me too much to send me to them when I was an innocent child.

And so, I must die.

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Though there was hardly any wind, the cold was all-pervasive, and Jamieson decided to put on his Gore-Tex coat. The procedure was more complicated than he remembered. His two companions stopped when they noticed him struggling with his pack, Francisco looking away politely, Angelo grinning at him and taking the opportunity to fortify himself with more *chicha*.

When they set off again, Francisco nodded up to the thin blade of the ridge before them. "This one, señor, I think it is nearly the last."

"The last . . . You mean the last before the summit?"

Francisco nodded, and Jamieson, his spirits lifted by the possibility of achieving his goal, strode off ahead. When he drew level with Angelo the guide offered him a drink, but Jamieson waved the bottle away.

It wasn't the final ridge, but it did mark the start of the steepest part of the ascent. Soon they were scrambling up the narrow spur on all fours. This was raw, jagged terrain and Jamieson forced himself to move slowly and carefully, focusing on each movement as a separate painstaking process, ignoring his physical discomfort and never thinking about the sheer cliffs on either side. Hurrying would only get him killed. Angelo, apparently ignorant of the correct way to climb a mountain, virtually capered up the rocky slope. Francisco brought up the rear, taking as much care. He was, Jamieson liked to think, as out of breath as he.

He was so intent on what was directly in front of his eyes that he didn't realize he had reached the summit at first. A thin whistling sound and a change in the gradient under his hands alerted him that something had changed, and he glanced up, blinking sweat out of his eyes. They'd come out onto a gently rising rocky plateau about fifty feet across, the higher southern end of it carpeted in snow. The whistling was the wind, thin and chilling.

Angelo was meandering toward something this side of the snow patch; it looked like a brightly colored bush. Jamieson started to ask what he was doing, but his mouth was so dry he could only croak. He took a few steps onto the summit, shrugged off his pack, and pulled his canteen from his belt. The water tasted wonderful, and he closed his eyes, lost in the sensation of earth below him, sun and air above him, and life-giving water going into him. Suddenly the canteen was knocked from his hand. He opened his eyes to see Angelo backing off rapidly. For a moment, Jamieson was too bemused to react, and he found himself staring at the water spilling out of the canteen and seeping into the parched soil. He tore his gaze from the strangely hypnotic sight.

"Why'd he do that, Francisco?"

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Francisco dropped his gaze. "I am sorry. A misunderstanding," he said, then stalked off after Angelo. Jamieson frowned. Francisco was normally so reasonable; this surliness was something he'd never seen before. No, he had once, a long time ago. When he had offered to help clean up after the storm, the night after he and Rosa . . . No, his imagination was running away. Damned altitude.

Jamieson felt a flash of anger. "Wait up." Francisco didn't seem to have heard him. Perhaps he should remind him who was paying for this expedition. Jamieson strode across the plateau to where Angelo and Francisco stood by a waist-high wooden crucifix adorned in ribbons, strings of beads, plastic necklaces, and paper flowers. At the base of the cross was more junk—empty bottles, model cars, half burnt sticks of wood, shapeless lumps of candy, and a handful of tiny seashells.

Francisco looked up at his approach and moved to intercept him, his expression contrite. "Señor, now is the time for the *Misa*."

Jamieson, confused by Francisco's change of demeanor, nodded. "Yeah, the *Misa*. Right." The locals never went up into the mountains without doing their own version of the Catholic Mass, which they called the *Misa*.

Francisco gestured toward Jamieson's pack. "Shall I fetch your offerings?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks." Jamieson wasn't sure if it was the coca, the altitude, or the surreal experience of finding seashells and Tonka toys on top of a fifteen-thousand-foot mountain, but he was beginning to feel a little disconnected from reality.

He looked around, trying to ground himself in his surroundings. Lake Titicaca shone like a jewel in a fold of the mountains, turquoise and serene in the evening sun. The valley below was in shadow, and mist rolled up the flanks of the mountains from the cooling land.

"Here, señor." Francisco handed him two bottles and a woven string bag containing sweets, ribbons, a small rust-blotted mirror, and several badly pressed metal trinkets. "You must give the offerings for the *Misa* to Angelo, as we are here for you."

The Aymara elder was muttering to himself in a mixture of Latin, Spanish, and Aymara. Jamieson caught the Spanish words *padre*, father, and *lluvia*, rain. As Jamieson approached Angelo stopped and gestured for him to put the offerings on the ground by the cross, then rubbed his thumb and two middle fingers together and looked at Jamieson questioningly. Jamieson sighed and dug into his money belt, producing a handful of small denomination notes. Angelo took the money and nodded in dismissal. Jamieson headed back to stand next to Francisco.

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"Will this take long? We'll need to find somewhere sheltered to camp, preferably off the summit, and I'd rather get to the tomb tonight, in case Angelo changes his mind tomorrow."

Francisco shrugged. "The *Misa* cannot be hurried, señor."

"Yeah, I thought not. Well, I suppose we'll just have to wait then."

The sun had all but disappeared behind the mountains by the time Angelo finished. Jamieson passed the time by wandering round the summit, stamping his feet to keep warm, and taking pictures of Angelo at his ritual. He assumed Angelo wouldn't mind; the Aymara didn't buy into that old cliché about the camera stealing your soul, though they did tend to hold their hands out for cash once you'd finished taking your pictures. At one point he looked up from his viewfinder to see Francisco, who had stood impassive throughout, crossing himself in unison with the old native. Well, that was Catholicism for you. He also photographed the surrounding peaks; the tip of snow-covered Mount Illimani in the distance would make a particularly nice shot, especially with Angelo in the foreground. It was a shame the light was going, as they were high enough, and far east enough, that he might have been able to glimpse the edge of the Amazon basin if everything in that direction hadn't been in darkness.

Angelo stood, crossed himself a final time, and walked over. Then in a startlingly familiar gesture, he took Jamieson by the elbow and started to lead him up the snow-covered southern edge of the plateau.

"Now he will show you where the tomb is, señor Jamieson," Francisco said, striding across the summit to join them. Despite having nothing more on his feet than a pair of sandals soled with old truck tires, Angelo ploughed into the thin covering of snow, dragging Jamieson with him. He stopped just short of the southernmost edge. The mountain fell away for fifty feet to a flat-bottomed gully that ran diagonally away from the peak. Mount Illimani dominated the horizon.

During the course of the *Misa*, Angelo had disposed of the alcohol they had lugged up there, either onto the rocky ground or down his throat, but now he produced a small green-tinted bottle from under his poncho, and made another attempt to get Jamieson to drink, waving the bottle and gabbling incomprehensibly. Jamieson looked at the old man, at the bottle, and at the frightening descent. "Francisco?"

"Yes, señor?"

"Please don't tell me that this crazy old man wants me to drink that rotgut and then try and climb down this precipice."

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"I am afraid, señor, that this is exactly what he wants."

"Okay. That's it. I'm cold, I'm tired, my head feels like it's full of Japanese drummers, and my credulity has been stretched to the breaking point. Tell him No."

Francisco came up to stand beside him and pointed downwards. "Follow my finger, señor."

Jamieson focused where the translator was pointing. There almost directly below them, on a small flat space at the edge of the gully, was a square box built of rocks, roofed with a flat stone slab.

"Yes! Okay, we're going down. But without the booze, right?"

Francisco said something and Angelo shook his head. "Señor, he insists. He says that there is only one safe way down, which he will only show you if you take *chicha*."

"For God's sake . . . Oh screw it." Jamieson, elated that his goal was finally in sight, grabbed the bottle off the old man and poured the contents down his throat. It tasted just as vile as he expected and hit his gut like lava. He handed the empty bottle back to Angelo, who smiled, nodded, then dashed the bottle on a rock and started down the escarpment.

It was not as hard as it looked. The slope was rough and steep but there were plenty of handholds, and no loose rocks. Jamieson could feel the corn liquor burning into his stomach lining. It combined with the coca and the excitement of being within reach of his goal to make him feel sickly ecstatic. Get there, find the tomb, then he could vomit, shout, pitch camp, pay these people off, whatever. He distracted himself by running internal pictures of the few previous finds of intact Inca mummies: the faces of sleeping children nestling among perfectly preserved fabrics, feather cloaks, ornate idols, and if he was really really lucky—and didn't he deserve it after all the trouble he'd been to?—golden ornaments.

As soon as they reached the bottom of the rock face he stumbled toward the stone box. His vision was blurred by the alcohol and the descent from sunlight into shade, but the tomb almost seemed to glow in the semidarkness. It was definitely man-made. It was the right size, just large enough to hold a young adult if they sat with their knees drawn to their chest. Yep, this was the real thing all right. He felt round the stone lid and rocked it slightly. It was balanced expertly, as only the Inca knew how, and one good shove should shift it. He bent down and put his shoulder to it. It moved a little, then stuck. He heaved again. There was a grating noise and the lid slid into the gully with a resounding crash.

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I hope I can learn to love Arhua. She is none too clever, and her love for me makes her more foolish still, but she is pure and true and she has given up everything for me. When I asked her to fetch herbs from the wise-woman's hut the night before the Sun-Priest came, she believed that I had accepted my fate and asked for the purgatives only to purify my body before I drank the Priest's drug. The full truth scared her—she fears all and every god, even those that are not of our people—but still she did not question.

The men built my tomb very well, though I doubt Arhua could have moved the stone lid by herself had I not been helping her from inside. She was weak with cold by then. Although the Priest brought me up here for dawn and didn't stay longer than he had to, Arhua waited until the sun was high in the sky before she dared come out of her hiding place and free me. The fear in her eyes was not just for herself—though she can no more go back to the Valley than can I—but fear of disobeying the gods. As we put the lid back (we want any future visitors from the Sun-King to think we obeyed him, after all) I tried to explain that I was condemned by politics, not by the heavens, but she just looked away. She is happier now, as we have let each other's blood, made the offering as my father would have had it made. Not too much blood though: we will need all our strength if we are to survive the journey through the mountains to the land of the tall trees.

Jamieson looked up from the waist-high stone box. "Francisco! This is an Inca tomb, right? And the Inca buried their children with all that ceremonial shit and treasure, and you told me, you specifically told me, this one had definitely *not* been robbed out. And it's empty. Not even a damn feather."

"Nothing, señor?" The translator watched Jamieson blandly from the other side of the tomb.

"See for yourself."

Francisco made no attempt to look inside. "I have not lied to you, señor Jamieson."

"What are you talking about?"

"This tomb was built by the Inca, as I said. And it has not been robbed out, as I said. But it was never used. This is Aymara land, never really part of the Inca empire. The Aymara have their own ways."

"Inca, Aymara, bloody Egyptians, I don't care who built it, what matters is that it's empty!" Jamieson felt the bile rising in his throat. "Ugh. Oh, I see. That little story Angelo told us. Meant to be some sort of clue. Very funny. So the joke's on the gringo now,

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eh?" He glanced around but he couldn't see the old man, and turning his head made him feel dizzy.

Francisco favored Jamieson with a small self-deprecating shrug. "He insisted on telling you the history of this place, despite my misgivings. It was a test to see how much attention you were really paying. Not much, it seems."

"So you knew? You knew the tomb was empty and you still let Angelo drag us up here?" He had trusted Francisco. He had paid him a generous advance.

"I did not know for sure. But Angelo told me, and I trust his word."

"What exactly are you saying here?" Anger was giving way to fear. "What's your game, Francisco? Wait a minute. No one knows I'm up here. Just the two of you . . . Jesus. You're going to rob me. Now listen. I don't have any more money on me. We used it all. In the *Misa*, see? But back at the hotel— Take me back to the La Paz and I can get more money. Lots more money. I'm rich now, much richer than last time. If that's what this is all about, then money is not a problem." He gulped back the taste of vomit.

"It is not about money, señor. It is about blood, and honor. If it were simply a matter of money then I would have gone to the American embassy to try and trace you ten years ago."

"What? What the hell are you talking about now?" Darkness was eating at the corners of his vision; he gripped the edge of the tomb for support.

"You did not leave us a contact address, but the embassy might have been able to help. As it was, Rosa would not have it. And after she died bringing your son into the world, I adopted him as my own, so your money would not have been welcome."

"My son?" He couldn't hold back the nausea any longer. He sank to his knees and heaved up his guts onto the stones. Francisco's words whirled round his head. Rosa had got pregnant. It simply hadn't occurred to him. He kept his head down for ten seconds or so after the worst had passed, pressing it against the stone of the tomb, trying to think what he should say. Finally, he raised his head and knelt up. Francisco was still standing on the far side of the tomb, his expression neutral. "Listen—and you have got to believe me here—the whole thing with your sister was a misunderstanding. I really, genuinely thought she wanted . . . I misread things badly, at the time. But if I'd had any idea, any idea at all she was . . . Jesus, I've got a son. That's amazing. Where is he?"

"In my house. As I said, he is part of my family now. He knows of you and, amazingly, does not hate you. You will not meet him, though."

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"Whatever, and I mean *whatever* I can do—"

"You can do nothing, señor." Francisco almost sounded sorry.

Jamieson heard muttering behind him and started to get up. Something heavy dropped onto the back of his calves, pinning his legs to the ground. "What the . . . !" There was a blast of foul breath and Angelo's face swam briefly into view. The old man was muttering something under his breath. Jamieson looked up through the tears of pain to Francisco, who had stepped round the tomb.

Francisco said quietly, "I am sorry about the discomfort. There is a rock on your legs, to keep you still."

Jamieson just stared at him, taking short, hard breaths.

"For whatever reason—global warming or the displeasure of the gods—there has been no rain here for three years. In desperate times we *primitives* will tend to look for desperate solutions. You are a powerful, rich man from a powerful, rich nation. You are also, through unhappy accident, part of my family. This makes you perfect."

"Perfect for what?" Jamieson panted. Then he saw what Francisco was getting out of the pocket of his well-pressed suit. "Oh, no. You have got to be kidding!"

Francisco handed the razor to Angelo. "It will be quick, I promise. Angelo is very skilled."

Over the sound of the old man's chanting Jamieson heard the snick of the razor being opened.

Francisco stepped up to stand beside him. "Understand that we do not take such steps lightly. Blood alone is normally enough. But in your case there would be questions. And there is the matter of Rosa's honor."

"For God's sake!" Jamieson's voice broke, along with his bladder control. "You can't perform Inca sacrifices in the twenty-first century."

Francisco laughed mirthlessly, then bent down and whispered in Jamieson's ear, "You haven't listened, have you, señor? We are not the Inca. The Inca are long gone. We are the Aymara. We have always been here. Our ways endure."

Angelo laid the blade against his neck. Jamieson screamed, oblivious to the piss running down his leg, reduced to an animal by fear.

The blade was sharp: he hardly felt the cut. Then the blood flowed, and his scream was swallowed up by the mountains.

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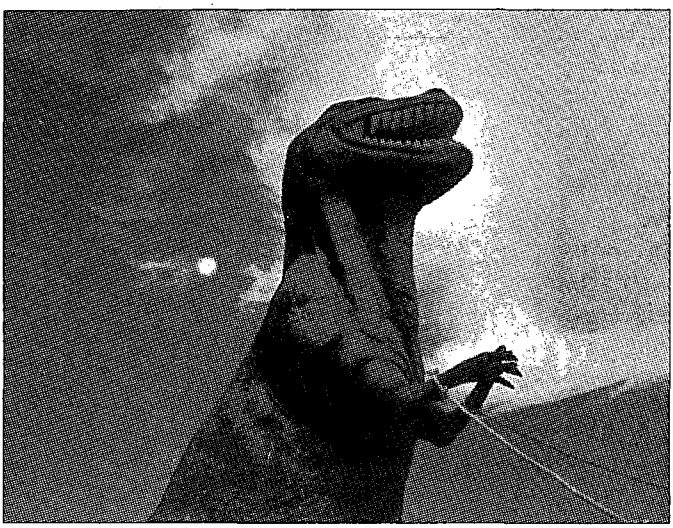
MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Sic Semper Tyrannis

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "July/August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the January/February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 236.

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PROFIT WITHOUT HONOR

JOHN H. DIRCKX

Melissa Menucci unlocked the door that led from the second floor lobby to the choir loft and held it open while Owen Ferguson and his helper passed through. Ferguson put down his heavy tool chest while his helper, who happened to be his grandson, stood gawking in the half-light.

"I don't think that's locked," said Melissa, pointing toward the narrow door in the side of the paneled oak organ case.

"Never has been." Ferguson drew it open and peered briefly into the murky interior of the organ. "Is the organist around this morning?"

"No, sir, she's on vacation. But she said no special problems. Just the routine tuning." Melissa left them to their work.

"Okay, Anthony," said Ferguson, "you can put your eyeballs back in. She's old enough to be your mother."

He moved to the front of the loft, raised the lid of the organ console, and switched on the electric blower. A faint whine in the basement was followed immediately by a muffled thump from within the organ, as dozens of pneumatic cells filled with air under pressure. Ferguson touched a stop tab and played a few scales with speed and precision, then struck a series of chords.

"Not too bad," he said. He slid off the bench and picked up a work light with a long coiled cord. "Your turn, pal."

The boy took his place at the console and played a few scales of his own while his grandfather clambered inside the organ case and arranged his light.

An hour later they were still at it, the tuner clanking and banging invisibly within the organ and occasionally calling out directions to his assistant, who sat hunched over the manuals,

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depressed and stupefied by the dreary monotony of his task. Suddenly Owen Ferguson grunted and uttered a mild profanity, shocking Anthony out of his lethargy.

"Grandpa, we're in church!"

"*You're* in church. I'm in an attic with sixty years' worth of dust and cobwebs, and I just touched the light with my elbow. Give me that A natural again . . . Hey, and the octave along with it, remember?"

"This extraordinary and unseasonable industry of the bees . . ."

A little later they became aware of raised voices in the hall outside the choir loft—of one voice, at least, expressing anger or indignation. "And so now, at last," roared the speaker, apparently a man of advanced years, in stentorian tones, "this extraordinary and unseasonable industry of the bees is explained in the most shocking fashion imaginable."

Whoever answered him spoke with such restraint that his words weren't intelligible in the choir loft. Somewhere a door was abruptly closed, and after that the organ tuner and his helper heard no more about bees.

"Hey, Anthony," Ferguson presently called from a catwalk high in the swell chamber. "These solo reeds are as far out of tune as a pack of coyotes with laryngitis. How about we finish this up after lunch?"

Anthony immediately sat up straighter on the bench and expressed his approval with a single word: "Coo-wul."

New Covenant Theological Seminary nestled on a wooded hill overlooking the bend in the river about half a mile northeast of downtown. The administration building looked impressive when seen from a distance, its central mass surmounted by a stone belfry and flanked by two ivy-clad wings with a snow-white limestone parapet around the roof.

Viewed at closer quarters under the searching sun of a June afternoon, it showed the ravages of age and weather—cracks in the stonework only partly concealed by the ivy, paint peeling from sashes and gutters. No one had gotten around yet to clearing the winter's accumulation of leaves and debris from the hedges, much less clipping them.

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn parked between the organ tuner's truck and the van from the coroner's office. There were only

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four other cars, parked in a row outside the main entrance to the administration building, in a lot with a capacity of more than a hundred cars. At the far end of the lot two painters' trucks stood outside a newer and larger building of red brick with gray stucco trim.

The woman who opened the door for him must have been watching through a window. She was dark, in her thirties, with exotic, gypsylike features and a florid, overwhelming charm. After admitting him she relocked the door with a huge brass key before looking at his badge.

"The policemen had to leave," she said. "The man from the coroner's office is in the chapel. Through there."

Opposite the entrance, across a marble-paved lobby, frosted-glass doors led to the chapel. The woman disappeared up a stairway as Auburn crossed to the chapel and entered.

It was a larger space than he would have expected, probably able to hold about twice as many people as the parking lot would hold cars. Tall, narrow stained-glass windows with abstract designs were set at long intervals along both side walls. Copper-shaded lamps, all of them ablaze, hung in a row above the center aisle from a barrel-vaulted roof about thirty-five feet high.

Auburn found himself at the rear of the center aisle under an overhanging gallery. The first thing he saw while the architectural details were still registering was the figure of an elderly man lying motionless, approximately under the front edge of the gallery. Nick Stamaty from the coroner's office was just attaching some papers to a clipboard. His research case and camera case lay in one of the dark wood pews with a pair of rubber gloves, turned inside out, resting beside them.

Stamaty greeted him with his usual suave gravity and handed him the dead man's driver's license and a plastic bag containing a wallet, a ring of keys, and a pocket pen. Auburn scanned the information on the driver's license. Reverend Austin Coates, aged seventy-one. The name had seemed vaguely familiar when Auburn had first heard it at headquarters twenty minutes earlier. The face wasn't.

It was a frequently recurring scenario. The police had been called to the site of an accidental death; the responding officer had called the coroner's office; and the coroner's investigator had suspected foul play and summoned the police back to the scene.

Stamaty squatted near the dead man's head. "I don't know how much you got from your guys—"

"Just his name," said Auburn. "And the fact that the people here found him dead and figured he fell from up above. What doesn't fit?"

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"Look at the side of his head, behind the ear. Don't touch."

Auburn bent close and saw a deep and livid dent, roughly triangular, in the dead man's scalp.

"Tell me how he got that, landing on a carpeted floor," said Stamaty. "Even if he fell from the moon."

"Could he have hit against something up above?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Come on up. You haven't seen anything yet."

Stamaty led him back to the lobby and toward the open stairway up which the woman with the big brass key had vanished. Auburn looked over the contents of the dead man's wallet. "Anything else on him besides this stuff?" he asked.

"About twelve dollars and a couple of bottles of pills—blood pressure, heart." Under county law, the coroner's office had charge not only of the pills but also of the money, until a ruling had been made on the cause of death. Auburn had the keys and the wallet only because he was in a better position to make use of them than the coroner's investigator.

On the second floor there was another lobby directly over the lower one, illuminated by skylights and floored with linoleum. An elderly man and a teenaged boy sat in front of the only window, manifesting the silent despair of people waiting for a bus that doesn't run that route anymore.

"Are they relatives?" Auburn asked before they got close enough to be heard.

"Organ tuner and his grandson. The kid was the one that noticed the body."

"What about next of kin?"

"A brother out in California. The people here are getting in touch with him."

So far Auburn had seen nobody pertaining to the institution except the woman who had let him in. He caught sight of her again through the window of an office as they passed. "Is this place still a going concern?" he asked Stamaty.

"Oh sure. This is their semester break, or whatever they call it. The students and the faculty are all gone. There's just a skeleton crew of administration people around."

Two strands of yellow vinyl tape, bearing the legend CORONER'S DEPARTMENT—DO NOT ENTER endlessly repeated, had been stretched across the open doorway to the choir loft. They ducked under the tape.

The loft was dark and stuffy. Its floor sloped very gently down toward the rail at the far edge, forty feet away. A massive organ

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case of dark wood dominated the space.

Taking out a flashlight, Stamaty knelt down and motioned Auburn to do the same.

The carpet here was the same as on the lower level, but less worn. Stamaty held his flashlight near the surface and swept the beam slowly back and forth, picking out two wavering ridges in the pile of the carpet that ran from the doorway they'd just come through all the way to the rail.

Auburn eyed the large metal tool chest on the floor outside the door that gave access to the interior of the organ, and a canvas pouch bulging with tools lying next to it. "Could the tuners have made those marks dragging something down there?"

"They say not. There's more."

Avoiding the tracks in the carpet, they went forward to the railing, which was of varnished oak to match the rest of the decor. Even without Stamaty's flashlight, the fresh scratches in the varnish were perfectly evident. Peering over the rail, Auburn saw the body lying gaunt and still directly below.

"Do you think that crack on his head killed him?"

"The autopsy will tell that. Either way, I don't think he was putting up much of a fight when he went over. And just about anybody could have dragged him in here and flipped him over. He's so skinny he probably had to jump up and down and wave his arms to set off the door opener at the supermarket."

"What time did the kid find him?"

"About one, maybe a quarter after. The secretary says this loft is usually locked, but she let the tuners in here about nine this morning and they blocked the door open when they went out to lunch. As soon as they came back, the kid looked over the rail and that's what he saw. You should probably talk to them first. I told them they'd have to quit working till an evidence technician goes over everything up here. They'd like to go on to another job before it gets much later."

Auburn glanced at his watch, then looked around him to get his bearings. For the first time he became aware of an elderly man standing at the front of the chapel in deep shadow, near the pulpit, apparently staring fixedly at the corpse.

"Somebody in this place must have been thinking ungodly thoughts and doing unholy deeds this morning," he said. "Sure doesn't look like premeditated murder, though, does it?"

"It could be, though. They say he had a balance problem Somebody might have bashed him in the head and then tossed him over, figuring it would look like an accident," Stamaty said.

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"Or suicide."

"I wouldn't think so. Not a clergyman, in church. That wouldn't be kosher." Auburn looked for a trace of jocularity in Stamaty's expression and found none. Stamaty, he remembered, was a pillar of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The administrative offices of New Covenant Theological Seminary were disposed around the periphery of the upstairs lobby. Near the entrance to the organ loft, Auburn had noticed an office, its door ajar, with the legend DR. AUSTIN COATES—RECTOR on a plate next to the door. Instead of talking to the organ tuners in the open lobby, he took them there for an interview.

The room was spacious, wood paneled, crammed with books. Three worn leather chairs were ranged in front of the window. The monitor of the computer on the stand next to the desk was dark. A polished cane of dark wood, really more of a walking stick, leaned in one corner.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said Auburn. "I'll try to make this quick. I know you've been waiting a long time already."

The older man was lithe and wiry, his hair, skin, and clothes the color of dust. He handed Auburn a business card that identified him as Owen Ferguson, pipe organ tuner-technician. Auburn copied the name in the upper left corner of a three-by-five-inch file card.

"I understand you started work about nine this morning?"

"That's right. Knocked off for lunch around a quarter after twelve, got back here again about one. This is my grandson Anthony. He'll be fifteen in August if I don't decide to feed him to the lions first. He's helping me on some jobs this summer, although he'd rather be outside playing rugby and trying to break his other collarbone."

Anthony perched on the edge of a chair, deadpan and aloof, only his restless eyes giving token of his emotional state.

"Fourteen years old and he's never seen a dead person before," Ferguson continued. "Long lives run in our family." He rapped on the desk.

Despite a recent budget freeze on operational expenses, Auburn started a new file card for the boy. "What happened when you got back from lunch, Anthony?"

Anthony squirmed. His beltless pants drooped off his hips, showing two inches of skin and three inches of black and yellow striped underwear below the tail of his shirt. "I don't know. I just looked down there and saw him."

"Are you pretty sure he wasn't down there before lunch?"

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"Oh yeah." Anthony's voice cracked and he swallowed. "I would have seen him."

"Did you see anybody else down there in the chapel?"

"You mean right then?"

"Then or any other time?"

"No."

"So what did you do after you saw him?"

"I told Grandpa there was a man lying on the floor down there, like maybe he passed out or fell down."

"Did you go down to check on him?"

"No. No." He swallowed again. "Grandpa looked over the rail and then he went and told the secretary." He looked at Ferguson for reassurance, which was swiftly forthcoming in the form of a wink and a nod. "She called some man out of an office over there and they went down."

"The dead man is Dr. Coates, the rector of the seminary," Auburn told them. "Did either of you know him? Ever see him before?"

They hadn't.

"Did either of you see or hear anything unusual this morning? Any kind of trouble, commotion, loud noises, people yelling?"

"Actually we did hear somebody yelling out there in the hall just before we left for lunch," said Ferguson. "Sounded like some old guy that didn't have all his marbles. He was carrying on about—what did he say, Anthony? Something about bees?"

Anthony cleared his throat. "He said something like, 'Now I understand why the bees have been so busy lately.' Only he said it like—like he was making a speech, or reciting poetry—"

"Or giving a sermon," added Ferguson.

"Did you recognize his voice?"

They didn't.

"There are some marks on the carpet next to the organ, like something was dragged along the floor. And some scratches on the rail. Could either one of you have made those marks this morning?" The tuner and his grandson, both of whom clearly saw the sinister purport of the marks, assured him they hadn't made them.

After letting them go, Auburn closed the door of the office and used the phone to report in to headquarters and arrange for an evidence technician to visit the scene. While he was on the phone he cast his eyes over the furnishings of the office, noting the arrangement of the articles lying on the desk and of other objects in the room. An open desk calendar contained a number of scrib-

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bled notes, but no appointments for that day. He saw no sign that any struggle had taken place in the room.

But something unusual had taken place here. Using a pencil, he pulled open one drawer after another and scanned its contents with a practiced eye. He also swung back the doors of a credenza behind the desk. After hanging up the phone, he went to the closet and examined its contents with care.

Cyrus Auburn had conducted many searches in the course of his career, and he knew exactly what to do, and what not to do, in order not to leave behind any trace that a search had ever taken place. And he was perfectly certain that an amateur had been searching Dr. Coates's office, probably since its tenant's death.

Like many an old man's office, this one was liberally garnished with dust. The numerous streaky disturbances in that dust made it obvious that somebody had been poking around in places that were normally immune to disturbance. But besides that, things had been left jumbled in every drawer and cabinet Auburn examined.

That could mean that the searcher had been interrupted before he had completed his searching. Or that he had found what he was after, and took off with it. Auburn was making a leisurely study of the contents of the wastebasket when the door opened.

A gaunt man with a scholarly stoop, just verging on middle age, appeared in the doorway. "Is there anything I can do to help, Officer?" With his long, bulbous nose and heavy-lidded brown eyes he looked like a genial moose. Auburn abandoned his search and showed identification.

"I'm Roger Levingord. I just this minute got back from lunch and heard what happened to poor old Coates." He dithered in the doorway, shook his head, decided to come on into the office. "This is a terrific shock for me. I've worked with Austin Coates day in and day out for years. Years."

"You're a member of the faculty here, sir?"

"Registrar. That's just a title—I have an assistant who actually handles the academic records. My real job is to head up Ephod-Aegis, the publishing arm of the institution. I do editing, programming, a certain amount of marketing." He stood in the middle of the office and looked around as if he'd never been there before. "Melissa said you had some idea that Coates was killed deliberately. I can assure you you're making a mistake there. I mean, this is a seminary, not a tenement or a high school in the slums. And there's nobody around here today but senior members of the administration and a couple of support staff."

In his fourth month as a rookie, Auburn had participated in a

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drug bust at a wedding reception. The mother of the groom had passed out cold on the floor and the father of the bride had threatened him with a champagne bottle. Since then he'd never looked back. "There are strong indications that Dr. Coates's death wasn't accidental," he said. "I'm treating it as a homicide."

Levingord shook his head vigorously. "Coates had a terrible problem with balance—something wrong with his inner ear—everybody here will tell you that. He usually carried that stick around with him to keep from falling on his face. If he'd taken it with him when he went into the choir loft, he'd probably still be alive now."

"Do you have any idea why he would have gone to the choir loft?"

"There were some men here this morning servicing the organ. They left for lunch about the same time I did. Coates probably wandered in there to see what they'd been doing. He was always poking his upper peninsula into other people's business. That's the kind of guy he was."

"You say you worked closely with him?"

"For years. He was the professor of scriptural languages. That's Hebrew and Greek, as if you didn't know. He and I collaborated on a number of projects, mostly electronic concordances to the Old and New Testaments in the original languages."

"What were his duties as rector?"

"About what mine are as registrar. The title is more or less honorary. Coates was over seventy. He was going deaf, not to mention slightly nutty, but he wouldn't retire. As rector, he had no particular administrative authority. The board of governors just gave him the title because he'd been here since the days of the prophets."

"You said he was . . . nutty. Did he get into a lot of arguments, get people mad at him?"

"He certainly did. He was a professional crank. He and I fought like tigers."

Auburn decided for the time being not to pursue the implications of this remark. "Was there anyone he'd had any particular trouble with recently? Any grudges, threats, pending lawsuits?"

"Absolutely not," said Levingord. "As I just told you, there's nobody around here today but a couple of old fogies, and two of the girls."

"Could you give me the names of everyone who's been here today?"

"Sure. There's Coates, of course, and the tuners; me; Debbie

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Renard, an editor who works with me on the publishing side; Melissa, the secretary around the corner there in the main office; Dr. Radcliffe, the president of the seminary; and Dr. Stidhem. Maybe you know him?"

"I know *of* him." Reverend Walter Stidhem, a preacher of considerable renown locally, was, like Auburn himself, African-American. "When was the last time you saw Dr. Coates alive? Did you talk to him this morning?"

"Oh yes. Not at any great length, but we passed in the hall a couple of times—once when I came in around nine o'clock, and again between eleven thirty and twelve, when I left for lunch."

"Where did you go for lunch?"

"The Fountain Square Grill, at the corner of Moffatt and Parkway. When classes are in session, we run a cafeteria in the other building." He paused to reflect and looked down at his casual outfit. "And I wear a tie."

"I have a statement from some witnesses that around noontime a man was heard yelling something about busy bees. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Bees? No, it certainly doesn't. But if anybody was yelling around here, it was probably Austin Coates. Maybe complaining about the racket the organ guys were making."

"Is it possible that Dr. Coates had a visitor this morning?"

"I didn't see anybody that didn't belong here, but it's possible. Melissa would know."

Melissa Menucci, the woman who had let him in half an hour earlier, was puttering behind a partly glassed-in counter that faced the upper lobby. Levingord left Auburn with her and ambled away as if happy to retire from the limelight.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about what happened this morning," said Auburn. "I'll try not to take too much of your time."

"That's all right. I don't really have much to do when classes aren't in session." She touched the corner of one eye with a linen handkerchief that she held balled up in her left hand.

"What is your position exactly?"

"Clerk-receptionist. I cover the desk and answer the phone. Plus make the coffee, sort the mail, call out for pizza, order the cake when it's somebody's birthday—things like that."

"Could you just run through the events of this morning as you saw them? What time did you come in today?"

"I'm supposed to be here by eight, but during the vacation breaks everything's pretty loose. I probably got here about a quarter after eight this morning."

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"Was anybody else here when you came in?"

"Dr. Radcliffe, the president, was in his office. He's kind of a morning person."

"So you don't have to unlock the door for the others?"

"Oh, no. All the people who have offices up here have their own keys to the building so they can come in at night or on weekends."

"What time did Dr. Coates get here?"

"I don't know. He was already here when I got here too." She used the handkerchief on her other eye, deftly avoiding its lavish coating of mascara. There was something slightly phony about these tokens of grief.

"When was the last time you saw him alive?"

"Maybe about eleven."

"Tell me about finding Dr. Coates."

"Right after the men who were working on the organ came back from lunch, the old one came up to the counter and said there was somebody lying on the floor in the chapel down below. I got Dr. Radcliffe and we went down and there was Dr. Coates, dead—" Her voice faltered and she shook her head. "I always thought he was such a nuisance, always complaining about something, and so sarcastic. I used to wish he wasn't here, that he'd retire, or die . . . And now he's dead. I just can't believe it."

"Did he have any visitors today?"

"I don't think so."

"Was the front door locked this morning?"

"No, I only locked it after the police came."

"So somebody could have come into the building during the morning or early afternoon?"

"I guess so. But nobody's been up here today except the staff. And the organ men."

"I saw some painters outside."

"They're working in some of the classrooms in the other building. They haven't been in here."

"What about cleaners, delivery people?" She was shaking her head. "Have you been here in the office all day? What about lunch time?"

"I eat right here every day." She pointed to a plastic lunchbox on the windowsill. Outside the window, Auburn saw an evidence van from headquarters pulling in next to his car in the parking lot. "Debbie and I usually have lunch together here so we can watch the phone and the counter during the noon hour. Debbie Renard—she works in Publications." She indicated a suite of offices across the lobby.

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"You called Dr. Coates a nuisance. Do you know if he'd had any special trouble with anybody recently?"

"You mean somebody on the staff?"

"Staff, students, members of the public. Any threats, anonymous letters—anything he did or said that might have triggered some hostile reaction?"

"No. Everybody just put up with him because he was old and kind of pitiful."

"Did you hear Dr. Coates, or somebody else, yelling something about bees this morning?"

She looked away suddenly. "I don't think so." She unrolled her damp handkerchief, laid it out flat on the counter, and began meticulously fan-folding it. "You think somebody killed him, don't you? Pushed him off the balcony?"

"It's a possibility we have to check out."

A buzzer sounded above their heads. "I think that's the evidence technician from headquarters trying to get in down below," said Auburn. "I can let him in if you'll let me have the key."

As he went down the stairs and unlocked the door, he took the opportunity to examine the key and the nature of the lock. Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, laden with a heavy field kit and photographic equipment, bustled in as if he were twenty minutes late for his own wedding. Auburn briefed him succinctly and directed him to the chapel.

When he went back upstairs, he found Melissa Menucci still thoughtfully folding and refolding her handkerchief at the counter. "Is there somebody who could show me around the building?" he asked.

"I could do that. I'll tell Debbie to listen for the phone."

She took him across the lobby to a long, narrow workroom that extended a considerable distance into one of the side wings. A woman in an austere business suit was conversing in an earnest, tight-lipped fashion with Roger Levingord at a work station that looked like the cockpit of a supersonic transport.

Levingord looked up at their entrance. "Come on in, Officer," he said. "This is where we bring Scripture study into the third millennium. Software programs that enable you to search the Scriptures by keyword—any of a dozen versions and translations, all in one package. This is our managing editor, Debbie Renard."

She gave Auburn a sober nod from behind her monitor. He sensed that Dr. Coates's death had shaken her more deeply than anyone else he'd seen so far that morning.

"Have you been here all day, Ms. Renard?" he asked.

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"Since about nine thirty."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions after Ms. Menucci finishes showing me around the building. By the way," he added, addressing both her and Levingord, "there's an evidence technician working in the chapel now."

Levingord shook his head with a mildly derisive air, but said nothing. Melissa asked Debbie Renard to listen for the phone while she was away from the office and then took Auburn on a quick tour of the building. On the lower level she showed him the library, two large lecture halls, and several faculty offices, all closed and dark. There were fire exits, all equipped with alarms, at the outer ends of the side wings. In the chapel, where Stamaty and Kestrel were now working around the body, she took him along a side aisle to show him the exits, also locked, at either side near the front.

When they got back upstairs, Melissa pointed out the offices of Dr. Radcliffe, the president of the seminary, and Dr. Stidhem, the chancellor, at the two front corners of the upper lobby, on either side of the window where the organ tuner and his grandson had been sitting when Auburn arrived. As before, the doors of both offices were closed. On the side of the lobby opposite the window and next to the entrance to the choir loft was the common room.

Auburn pushed open one of the glazed doors for a better look. The room smelled of stale tobacco smoke and fresh coffee. A glare of afternoon sun from two skylights showed comfortably shabby leather chairs, racks of periodicals, a fireplace, a television set, and a coffee maker. To judge by the accumulation of litter and dust, the housekeeping staff had gone on vacation at the same time as the students and faculty.

They ended the tour with a glance up the stairway to the bell tower, always locked and never used except around Christmas, when the neighbors condescended to tolerate a few chimes during daylight hours without writing complaining letters to the newspapers.

Auburn knocked at the door to the publishing suite before entering. Debbie Renard was standing at a window, staring out across the tops of blooming dogwood and redbud trees toward the river. Levingord was nowhere in sight.

Auburn peered around at the impressive array of computers, scanners, and photocopying machines. The Ephod-Aegis logo appeared on brochures, parcels, and posters in whatever direction he looked. "Do you publish books too," he asked, "or just electronic products?"

"We maintain a small list of books by members of the faculty.

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We just finished doing a collection of Dr. Stidhem's sermons, *Afraid of the Light*, a couple of weeks ago. We're between projects right now, so we're slacking off at the moment. No all-day proofreading sessions, no last-minute checking of references, no idiotic questions from the printer—"

Not as young or as attractive as Melissa, Debbie wore her hair in a tight bun, which emphasized her high, prominent forehead. She had what is sometimes called a forceful personality—unsmiling, economical in her movements, decisive in her actions. Auburn couldn't imagine her making the coffee or calling out for pizza. At the moment, her predominant emotion seemed to be anxiety rather than grief.

"You said you came in around nine thirty this morning." He took out a blank file card. "Did you see Dr. Coates, talk to him?"

"Neither. I try—tried—to stay out of his way when we didn't have business to discuss."

"Does that mean you didn't get along?"

"Frankly, I couldn't stand the man. He might have been a brilliant scholar, but he had the manners of a chicken thief."

"Well, if you didn't see him, did you hear him? Talking about bees, for instance?"

She froze only for an instant, but Auburn knew the word had touched a nerve. "No, I didn't hear him either. They were making such an awful racket this morning tuning the organ that I kept both of these doors closed."

"Did you see anybody around today who didn't belong here?"

"The only people I saw, up until the time Melissa told me Dr. Coates was dead, were Roger Levingord and Melissa. I didn't even see the organ tuners—just heard them. Is it true that you think somebody pushed him off the balcony?"

"We think it's a possibility. Speaking confidentially, do you know of any recent threats against Dr. Coates, any internal tensions—anybody around here impulsive or violent enough to have killed him that way?"

"No, I don't. And in my own mind I feel sure he just fell. Maybe you haven't heard about it, but he had a problem keeping his balance. He usually walked with a cane, but Roger says he left it in his office when he went into the choir loft."

"Do you have any idea why he did go in there?"

"I'm afraid not. He was totally unpredictable and, if you ask me, totally irresponsible. He was liable to turn up wherever you'd least expect him to be, and he was constantly meddling with things that didn't concern him."

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"Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know—just other people's business, their private affairs." She fell suddenly silent, as if she thought she'd said too much. And from that point forward, she said very little indeed.

An arched and deeply recessed doorway gave entrance to the office of Dr. Dermot Radcliffe, president of New Covenant Theological Seminary. Auburn's knock elicited a vague animal croak, which he interpreted as an invitation to enter. The office was bigger than Coates's, with windows facing in two directions. The clutter of books, papers, and artifacts reminded Auburn of a neglected museum.

He recognized the man behind the desk immediately as the spectral figure he'd seen standing at the front of the chapel earlier that afternoon. Dr. Radcliffe partly rose from his chair and then lapsed into it again. He looked as if he'd just been thinking of taking a nap and hoped this interview wouldn't take too long.

"Put that away," he said, when Auburn showed identification. "I know who you are and what you want. Please take a seat."

Seen up close, Dr. Radcliffe looked as old as one of the patriarchs, his face seamed and rutted like a relief map of the Holy Land. His voice was hushed and sepulchral. His left hand trembled incessantly like a bird with a broken wing.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but we feel that homicide is a very real possibility."

"You have your job to do." He picked up Stamaty's card from his desk with his quiet hand and examined it. "I told Coates's brother it was an accident, and I still think it must have been. He was beyond being a serious threat to anybody. He used to be a firebrand back in the seventies, when he turned up on all the talk shows, but over the past few years he'd degenerated into a querulous old dimwit."

Not, thought Auburn, a particularly enviable epitaph, and no help at all in suggesting a motive for homicide.

"How did a professor of biblical languages get on all the talk shows?"

Radcliffe indulged in a saturnine smile, showing a set of long and exceedingly irregular teeth. "By writing books that systematically undermined the validity of revealed religion."

"You said 'undermined'?" asked Auburn, somewhat taken aback. "I've been told he edited software versions of the Scriptures . . ."

"Exactly. He and Roger Levingord." Dr. Radcliffe had the habit

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of leaning his head to one side while he was listening and to the other while he was talking. "Between you and me, Ephod-Aegis keeps this institution out of the red—most of the time. But I never could see the use of being able to pinpoint every syllable uttered by every one of the prophets if you don't believe in prophecy. That reduces scriptural scholarship to the level of literary history and analysis."

"Are you saying that Dr. Coates himself wasn't a believer?"

Radcliffe pulled a wadded handkerchief from some inner pocket and took a couple of rough swipes at his nose as if he were knocking the dust off a brass doorknob. "Austin Coates and I were together at Princeton," he said. "Then he went out to San Francisco to study with Beiersdorff. Between them, by my calculation, those two have set Christianity back just a little less than two thousand years."

Auburn shrugged in bewilderment. "Then he seems to have been an odd choice for the rector of a seminary."

"Too true. Well, I didn't choose him. I didn't choose Levingord either, for that matter. He's an even bigger heathen than Coates. But of course he isn't in holy orders."

Dr. Radcliffe paused, seemingly lost in thought. Auburn suspected he was often lost in thought. "Where was I?"

"You were talking about Dr. Coates's career, his beliefs . . ."

"I can't believe anybody felt strongly enough about Coates's theological position to kill him. He was by nature a majority of one, if you get my meaning. A dissident, a rabble-rouser, a writer of letters to editors. But that was mostly in the past. The last year or so, he seemed too wrapped up in his own barren paganism to get into scraps with other people about it."

"So you're not aware of any particular feuds he was having lately, or of anyone who had uttered threats against him?"

"No, no. Certainly not."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Probably the day before yesterday. There are no classes in session at present. And I try to distance myself from the publishing operation. It may be keeping the roof over our heads, but the less I know about what they're putting out, the better. For that matter, the electronic side of it has left me pretty much behind." Auburn had noticed on entering the office that there was no computer here. "I know they've been hard at it for a day or two, but I don't know if they're retooling, or even if that's the right term."

"I won't bother you any longer, then," said Auburn. "One last question, though. Late this morning, someone was heard shouting

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about bees out in the lobby. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Shouting about bees?" Radcliffe stared at him as if he'd started yodeling.

"Something about the bees being unusually busy this morning?"

"It sounds like something Coates would say." His eyes flashed with sudden comprehension. "If it was Coates, I think I can tell you what he meant. They were tuning the organ this morning. I imagine you know that. Well, Coates's office is right next to the organ loft, and some of the pedal notes make the windows rattle in there." He seemed fully satisfied with his interpretation of the puzzle, which roughly matched Levingord's, and was as good as any Auburn had heard.

The Reverend's manner became more human. "Clergymen aren't immune to the machinations of Old Nick," he said.

After leaving Dr. Radcliffe's office, Auburn crossed the upper lobby to the organ loft and peered in. Kestrel was getting ready to photograph the marks Stamaty had discovered on the wooden railing. Auburn looked down into the chapel and noticed that the body had already been removed.

"Stamaty's gone," Kestrel said in his usual distracted manner. "He called the mortuary crew as soon as I got my pictures and rolled a set of prints."

"Well, just don't make me call him back here for another case."

"Hmm?"

"By falling over the edge."

"Falling off a balcony never hurt anybody. It's when you stop falling that the damage gets done."

Auburn could never decide whether Kestrel was really devoid of a sense of humor, or just endowed with one so subtle and unique that ordinary people couldn't fathom it.

Only one member of the staff remained to be interviewed. It was a little past three thirty when Auburn knocked at the office of Dr. Walter Stidhem, chancellor of the seminary. Dr. Stidhem opened the door himself.

"Come in, sir, come in," he said. "I've been expecting you." He was a massively built man with a leonine head and a sprinkling of lentil-shaped freckles across the bridge of his nose. A voluminous white turtleneck sweater accentuated his bulk. He seated himself behind his desk and shuffled papers. "I've just been making a few notes for a eulogy. A humbling event."

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"Humbling in what sense, sir?"

"My brother Austin is sleeping in the Lord, while I remain here below. Who am I that I should survive him?"

Auburn wondered whether this was sheer playacting or just the habitual manner of a seasoned preacher. "As you've probably heard," he said, "there are some indications that Dr. Coates's death wasn't accidental."

"Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm," said Dr. Stidhem, frowning in concentration and breathing hard through his nose.

"Do you know of anybody in particular who might have wanted him dead?"

"No, sir. One may take up arms against the wolf or the lion, but not against the hyena."

"I think you're saying Dr. Coates was more of a pain in the neck than a serious threat to anybody."

"You are astute, sir."

"Did you see him or talk to him this morning?"

"No. But I did hear him ranting in the corridor."

"Do you know who he was talking to? Could you hear what he said?"

"No, sir. These walls are mercifully thick. The timbre of his voice was unmistakable, but his words I could not distinguish."

Auburn sensed none of the camaraderie here that ordinarily springs up between blacks thrown together by chance in a predominantly white milieu. In fact, he felt that he was establishing virtually no rapport with Dr. Stidhem, as if the preacher were so used to addressing multitudes that he couldn't focus his attention on a single auditor.

"Did you and Dr. Coates work closely together?" he asked. "I'm not sure what your duties are as chancellor."

"The duties are few. It's a title of honor." He put his palms flat on his desk as if he were standing in a pulpit. "My true role here is that of professor of homiletics—that means teaching preaching. I've gained some small reputation in that line . . ."

"I've heard one of your sermons," said Auburn.

"Oh? Where?"

"Safe Shore Baptist, a year ago Easter."

"Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm." Something clicked somewhere, and from that moment forward Dr. Stidhem's manner became decidedly more human.

"I get the impression," said Auburn, "from what I've heard here, that Dr. Coates had offended some people by his liberal views on religion."

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"Austin was an apostle of form criticism." Stidhem's heavy jowls worked as if he were trying to bolt down a piece of half-chewed meat. "Or should I say he was a victim of it? It's a school of thought that emphasizes the human element in the writing of Scripture. The appeal of form criticism to a man like Austin Coates is that it reinforces the arrogance of one who refuses to accept the notion of a Supreme Being."

"That seems like a strange position for a clergyman to take," said Auburn..

"Of course it is. But clergymen aren't immune to the machinations of Old Nick. As St. Paul said, 'Knowledge puffeth up.' The smarter some people get, the more convinced they become that man has created God in his own image, instead of the other way around. So they start looking for reasons *not* to believe. Austin's stumbling block was discrepancies between the Gospels. He got so focused on the letter of Holy Writ that he lost sight of the spirit. But people don't get killed for not believing in God. Not nowadays. That would be martyrdom in reverse."

"I'm not necessarily looking for somebody with a carefully thought-out plan to murder Dr. Coates. Is there anybody he often got into arguments with, anybody with a short fuse, who might have lost their temper and taken a punch at him?"

"Nobody I can think of. And I'm not aware that anybody's been here this morning except a few members of the administration—old troopers like me, who've been putting up with Austin for years—and a couple of women."

When Auburn crossed the upper lobby, Melissa Menucci was still at her post, working at a computer while listening to a portable radio. He went back to Dr. Coates's office for a final look around. Seeing the cane still standing in the corner, he suddenly realized that, if Coates had been fatally struck down somewhere other than at his desk, he had probably had his cane with him at the time. If that was so, the killer must have returned the cane to the office to lend credibility to the theory that Coates had fallen off the balcony while wandering around without it. And in that case, there might be fingerprints on the cane.

He opened the blind at the side window to let in the afternoon sun and examined the cane closely, without moving or touching it. With a magnifying glass he easily detected three rough, parallel scratches in the varnish near the lower end. Several loose flakes of varnish still adhering to the margins of the scratches showed that they were of very recent origin.

He was on his way to find Kestrel when something else in the

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office caught his eye. Since the last time he'd been there, less than an hour ago, someone had taken up a small throw rug and put it back down so carelessly that most of the fringes at one end were tucked underneath. Further investigation confirmed that the searching he'd detected earlier had been resumed while he was with Dr. Stidhem or Dr. Radcliffe. There now seemed little room for doubt that the searcher, and thus presumably the killer, was among the people he'd just interviewed.

When Kestrel dusted the cane for prints, numerous partials showed up on the shiny surface. Although every single one of them belonged to the victim, Kestrel proceeded to photograph and lift them with tape anyway. Auburn decided to take a better look at the common room, still dusty and deserted in the sunshine slanting down from the skylights.

The whole place wore an air of casual comfort, like the living room of a country house. Its most conspicuous feature was a big redbrick fireplace, evidently genuine since the grate was full of ashes and fragments of burnt wood. As Auburn wandered among the overstuffed chairs, racks of clerical journals, and dusty tables cluttered with coffee mugs and bric-a-brac, he became aware of a faint, high-pitched whistle, somewhat like the sound put out by an old TV set.

But the TV was turned off, and this sound seemed to be coming from behind a large overstuffed chair next to the fireplace. After moving the chair slightly, he found the source—an irregularly shaped, pinkish orange object resembling an oversized blob of chewing gum that was emitting a steady squeal like a miniature air-raid siren. For a split second he wondered if he was looking at a space alien or a diabolical device beamed from the fourth dimension.

Then he remembered the package of hearing aid batteries he'd seen in one of Dr. Coates's desk drawers. In three seconds he was on his knees examining the brick hearth, and in three minutes Kestrel was in the room with field kit and camera to examine and record the traces of blood and hairs Auburn had found on the corner of the hearth.

Dr. Radcliffe was still idling meditatively at his desk. "I'd like to ask you a favor," Auburn told him. "Our evidence technician needs the fingerprints of everyone who was here this morning for comparison with some latent prints he found. If you wouldn't mind being the first to have your prints taken, I'm sure it would help us to persuade the others."

"Certainly. Just lead the way."

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"He'll bring his equipment in here, if that's okay with you. One other thing. We're going to seal Dr. Coates's office and the common room until tomorrow, when I'll be back with a search warrant."

"You must suit yourself in that respect," said Radcliffe. "But you don't need a warrant, as far as I'm concerned. I have no objection, personally or officially, to any searching you want to do here. If a felon has been at work, let's bring him to book."

"I appreciate your cooperation," said Auburn. "But unfortunately, without a warrant, any evidence I find would probably be thrown out of court."

"You mean the judges aren't always on the side of the angels?"

"That's exactly what I mean, sir."

They moved the coffee maker to the reception desk before sealing the common room.

Back at headquarters, Auburn initiated intensive background probes on Austin Coates and all the people he'd interviewed that morning, including the organ tuner and his grandson. After conferring briefly with his supervisor, Lieutenant Savage, he began the tedious chore of preparing an application for a search warrant, completing the necessary affidavit, and swearing it before a second-shift clerk who held a commission as a notary public.

By the time he was finished, all the judges had left the courthouse for the day. He turned in his papers with a request that they be reviewed by the first magistrate to appear on the scene in the morning, and went home to change clothes.

He was invited that evening to his sister and brother-in-law's for dinner. Before the meal he played catch for a few minutes with his two nephews, meanwhile giving them carefully censored versions of a recent case in which his involvement had made the newspapers.

After dinner, his niece Renata decided that it was her turn to monopolize Uncle Cy. Her thoughts had but one focus: choosing a name for the baby sister she was going to get in September. She dumped in Auburn's lap a book that gave the meanings or origins of several thousand names. Since she was only five, his function was to read out the names while she pondered their relative suitability.

He turned the pages idly, marveling at the variety and ugliness of the names with which some people cursed their children. "Meldoxa . . . Megrantha . . . Mehetabel . . . Melissa (Gr.): Honeybee." Remembering that Dr. Coates had been a professor of Greek and Hebrew, he flipped back to the D's and confirmed his

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sudden hunch that Deborah meant the same thing in Hebrew that Melissa meant in Greek.

After that, Renata no longer had his full attention.

The next morning he checked in at the courthouse before reporting to headquarters and found that an early bird judge had issued the search warrant he'd requested. When he got to the office, background reports were waiting for him on Dr. Coates and the people he'd interviewed at the seminary yesterday.

None of the several thousand municipal, state, and private law enforcement agencies nationwide that subscribed to the security probe network knew anything to the discredit of Dr. Austin Coates or the members of the seminary staff who had been present when he died. Owen Ferguson, the organ tuner, had been arrested twice for DWI in an earlier decade and a distant state. Walter Stidhem, D.D., was a retired Navy chaplain. Both Debbie Renard and Roger Levingord had impressive backgrounds in computers and electronic publishing, and impressive bank accounts as well.

It was a few minutes past ten when he got to the seminary. Debbie Renard pulled into the parking place next to his as he was getting out of his car. She looked as if she hadn't slept much, and after exchanging greetings they walked into the building together in silence. Dr. Stidhem was chatting over coffee with Melissa in the main office. Auburn found Dr. Radcliffe at his desk reading the morning paper, and served his search warrant.

The seals on the common room and Dr. Coates's office appeared to be intact. He started in the office, locking the door, opening the blinds, turning on the lights, and donning a pair of rubber gloves. As had often happened before, a night's sleep had completely reorganized his thoughts and perceptions. The size, proportions, and contents of the office seemed subtly altered from yesterday.

In particular, the paper feed tray of the computer printer stood out as if a spotlight were shining on it. It hadn't occurred to Auburn, while searching the room on the previous afternoon, to examine the stack of presumably blank paper in the tray. It did now, and halfway through the stack he found three printed sheets.

At first glance they looked pretty innocent—just the academic credentials of someone named Aidan D. Pickering. But as he inspected them more carefully and compared their contents, he was reminded of an axiom he'd learned in the evening logic course he'd taken while working on his own degree in criminal justice: "Contraries may both be false but they cannot both be true."

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He spent another hour in Dr. Coates's office and about forty-five minutes in the common room without turning up anything of apparent relevance to his investigation. He took his briefcase with him when he went into the men's room to dispose of the rubber gloves and wash the sweat from his hands. When he emerged, Melissa and Debbie were having lunch at the desk behind the counter in the reception office.

"You can move the coffee maker back to the common room," he told them. "I'm finished in there. Yesterday I asked both of you about a remark that Dr. Coates was heard to make shortly before he died—something to do with bees. You both said you didn't know what he meant. I think you do know. Your names, Deborah and Melissa, both mean 'bee'; I doubt if that was the first time he ever referred to you as the bees."

"He did call us that sometimes," admitted Melissa. "But we didn't hear him saying anything about bees yesterday. At least, I didn't."

"Neither did I," said Debbie. "As I told you, I was in the inner office across the hall with the doors closed to drown out—"

"You also told me your publishing activities were shut down for the time being. Yet Dr. Radcliffe claimed you were particularly busy this week—'retooling' was the word he used." Auburn took a file folder from his briefcase and opened it so they could see the top paper inside it.

Debbie Renard covered the lower part of her face quickly with a paper napkin.

"I see you recognize this," said Auburn. He tilted the folder so that the other two sheets became visible. "And these too? Maybe you can explain how Aidan D. Pickering managed to earn a master's degree in electrical engineering three times over, in three different years, from the same university."

Melissa looked slightly lost. Debbie put down her napkin, stood up, and addressed Auburn resolutely. "Let's go across the lobby."

She led him to the inner office of the publishing department and closed the door. "Melissa has nothing to do with this," she said. "She wouldn't know a fake transcript if it bit her nose off."

"You admit these are all fake?"

She shrugged. "What good would it do to deny it?"

"Before you say anything more, I want you to understand that I may decide to arrest you on criminal charges." He recited the mandatory warnings. "These weren't the first ones you did, were they?"

She sat down and stared reflectively out the window for a moment before answering. "It all started out so innocently. I'm

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sure you hear that all the time, but with me it's really true. When I was in college I worked at an insurance brokerage. Sometimes clients would forget to sign applications or releases, or they'd sign in the wrong place, or enter the current date instead of their birth date. So rather than put the transaction on hold while we sent the paperwork back to be done over, we'd fudge it."

The words flowed so smoothly that Auburn suspected she'd spent the night putting this defense together. "Did you ever sign a release," she asked, "or an application form that said, 'A photographic copy of this form shall be as valid as the original?' Of course you did—everybody has. Stop and think about it. It's nonsense. You might as well say, 'Anybody claiming to be me probably is.'

"A waiver like that is legally worthless because faking a photocopy is as easy as brushing your teeth. You can erase copying toner with an art gum eraser or cover it up with whiting fluid. Then you can make a collage, adding a signature and a seal or logo to a document, and with the right machine settings you can produce a flawless photocopy that no expert in the world would question. If ten-year-old kids can do it, it's not beyond the grasp of an adult.

"And that's just with a copying machine. With a standard flatbed scanner and a software package you can buy right off the rack in any computer store, you can scan a signed document, edit the wording, and print an altered version that nobody can prove isn't a photocopy of the signed original—unless they have the original for comparison. The possibilities with the Internet and e-mail are unlimited.

"A couple of years ago, one of the students here was in a bind because he'd lost his transcript of credits from another school, and I . . . made him a duplicate from scratch. Later he brought in a friend who needed some credits he didn't have. They said if I didn't make him a fake transcript too, they'd tell the authorities about the earlier one."

"So you sort of drifted into the business of faking academic credentials. All for free?"

"Just the first couple of times. Afterwards I started charging for them."

"Was Levingord in on this?"

"Roger? No, of course he wasn't."

"What about Dr. Coates?"

She scowled. "I told you I had as little as possible to do with Dr. Coates."

"Then why were these documents hidden in his office?"

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"They got mixed in with some papers he took from here yesterday morning."

"I see. And when he realized what they were, he tracked you down in the common room, didn't he, and challenged you to explain? You got into a tussle, and he fell and hit his head on the corner of the brick hearth. When you saw he was dead, you dragged his body into the choir loft and—"

At Auburn's mention of the common room, her face went gray and she started shaking her head in denial. The door opened abruptly and Dr. Radcliffe burst in, the picture of anguish and despair. Auburn saw both Dr. Stidhem and Roger Levingord behind him in the outer office, but they stayed where they were.

"She didn't do that," said Radcliffe. "I did. When Coates found those fake transcripts, he came running to me. I happened to be in the common room at the time. He started crowing about deceit and corruption, threatening to blow the whole thing open. I didn't mean him any harm. I never even touched him. I just grabbed the paper out of his hand and he tumbled over backwards. Nobody heard anything because the organ tuners were making so much noise next door."

Auburn recited the Miranda warnings again before questioning Radcliffe further. "Did you already know that the document faking was going on?"

"Certainly I knew about it. I was the one who put Debbie up to it in the first place. And it involved a lot more than academic transcripts." Debbie was sending him frantic nonverbal signals, so instead of elaborating, he merely said, "You'll have to find out the rest on your own. But I can assure you that it was all what we ethicists call victimless crime."

"I'll let the Fraud Squad sort that out. What I'm investigating," Auburn reminded him, "is Dr. Coates's death."

Dr. Radcliffe's left hand was trembling so violently that it shook his whole upper body. "When I saw that Coates was dead," he said, "I pulled him out of sight behind a chair and locked the door. He'd said he found four transcripts with different dates, but he only had one with him. I searched his office but I couldn't find the other ones. Debbie tried later and she couldn't find them either.

"After everybody but the girls had gone out to lunch, Debbie decoyed Melissa away from the desk while I dragged Coates into the choir loft and rolled him over the railing. I'm aware that was a criminal offense and I'm ready to pay the penalty."

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Auburn turned to Debbie. "So you knew all along that Dr. Coates's death wasn't an accident?"

She bridled. "It *was* an accident! Dr. Radcliffe told me so and I believed him. I still do."

"There were fresh scratches on Dr. Coates's cane," Auburn told Radcliffe, "but we didn't find any fingerprints on it except his own. Did he have it with him in the common room when he fell?"

"Yes. I may have acted like a fool when I moved Coates's body, but eventually the shrewdness and sagacity of the practiced theologian asserted itself. I put his cane back in his office, and my head isn't so far in the clouds that I don't know about fingerprints."

On the occasion of Rev. Dr. Walter Stidhem's installation as the ninth president of New Covenant Theological Seminary, he sent Auburn copies of two collections of his sermons, *Advice in the Nick of Time* and *Afraid of the Light*. Auburn expects to finish reading them sometime before hell freezes over.

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THE HIT

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

First things first, he double-checked to make sure it was Dickinson he had found, that he had not traveled two thousand miles to score the wrong woman again. Another miscue and he'd be offtrack for keeps, they'd said as much, in a way that told him check and be sure he was current on his life insurance premium.

He got directions to the sheriff's substation from the mush-faced gas jockey at Phillip's Garage and Self-Serve Fill-Up, who checked him out with the curious, brow-squeezed look the question always drew, but didn't ask why a stranger straight off the freeway had need for the law. They never asked, like *curiosity* wasn't a word in their dictionary. He was as sure of that as he was that they would never think to connect his question to the hit, once the hit was history and he was long gone, which also sat fine with him.

Out of sight, out of mind. Words to live by.

The substation was a half mile down Main Street, to the overhanging stoplight, a half block north after turning left, a freestanding single-story brick building about the size of a McDonald's. He wouldn't have been surprised to find the hand-painted RIPLEY COUNTY SHERIFF'S SUBSTATION sign hanging above the double-door entrance also proclaiming: "Millions upon Millions of Criminals Caught."

It was almost nine o'clock, the quarter moon lost behind layers of rain-fat black clouds. He eased the late model Toyota Camry he'd picked up for cash at a reliable no-questions-asked chop shop into an open diagonal spot and didn't bother chirping the door locks.

The only deputy around was at the reception desk, half-asleep, his chair tipped back against the wall, a *Sharpshooters' Monthly* on his lap. The elaborately carved nameplate by the log-in sheet said he was Bill Grange. His eyes snapped open to the clang of the service bell and did a bewildered zigzag to check his whereabouts. Satisfied, Grange adjusted his seat upright, drew an indifferent smile across his sun-baked baby face, and wordlessly wondered the reason for his visitor.

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"Franklin Bachardy," he said. He drew an ID case from an inside jacket pocket, flipped it open, and proffered it to the deputy sheriff.

Grange relocated a pair of wire-framed lenses from the desk to his lineman's nose and pushed them up tight against the break in his unruly auburn eyebrows. "FBI, huh?" The man calling himself Franklin Bachardy nodded agreement. The deputy said, "I once thought serious about going FBI. You guys have the best-looking badges ever." Bachardy accepted the ID case back and returned it to his pocket. "The knock-knock joke got in the way."

"The knock-knock joke?"

"As in, *Knock-knock, who's there?* Go ahead."

"Knock-knock, who's there?"

"The stork, and guess what I brung with me." The deputy sheriff wheezed a sigh. "Lesson in that, Agent Bachardy, is never knock-knock up your girlfriend before you got yourself a career set in stone." He shook his head. "So, what brings you way out here to the Nowhere Capital of the World?"

"Tracking somebody." The man calling himself Franklin Bachardy dipped into another pocket and this time pulled out a five-by-seven color photograph. "She look like anyone you know, Deputy? We have reason to believe she's resident here in Ripley."

"Believe it or not."

"What?"

"What people usually add on the first time or two they say Ripley. That was the name of some comic strip some guy named Ripley did a hundred years ago, but folks still remember it from somewhere—believe it or not." The deputy laughed at his joke. Franklin Bachardy contributed a friendly squeak of a grunt. "Not how this got its name though. Got it from a land speculator who squatted out here in what was then wasteland waiting to happen and is still a leading contender for the title. . . . What'd you say her name is?"

"Didn't. From the sound, though, you can put one to her."

"Two names," Grange said. "A first name and a last name. That's Lizzie Morrow, as sure as God made little green apples." His head bobbed in vigorous agreement. "You are not going to tell me Lizzie committed some crime, are you? Or, anything that'll cost Ripley probably the best damn church organist we ever had. . . . Not the only organ hear tell she's damn good around, but you didn't hear it from me."

Bachardy—thinking, *Who's this deputy think he is, Jay Leno? Letterman?*—popped an appreciative laugh and said, "Which church might that be?"

Grange gave him the name and, after checking the wall clock,

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directions. "You're of a mind, the nightly prayer meeting shouldn't be over for another half to three-quarters. Reverend Kiel, he really knows how to give the Bible a good workout. . . . You never did say what you're wanting with Lizzie."

"That's right," Bachardy said. He put a finger to his lips and winked.

The deputy made like he understood.

Blessed Samaritan was in the middle of Wellington Road, a well-lit block full of nondescript two-story tract homes of recent vintage—their lawns neatly groomed, flower beds and hedges well tended—and unblemished white picket fences. The moon played peek-a-boo with the rain clouds, making a dance of the shadows cruising the neighborhood.

Bachardy caught parking across from the church, about a half block up the street. He was close enough to hear the drifting sound of the organ and mixed voices singing some undecipherable lyrics to a hymn he remembered from his childhood, but couldn't immediately name. He stayed behind the wheel, aiming smoke out the window while he waited for the prayer meeting to end, mentally reviewing the options he had with the Dickinson woman. A k a Lizzie Morrow. Soon to be the late Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow.

He didn't have to wait long. He was chain-smoking his fourth when the organ quit abruptly and the church doors swung open and people began passing onto the cement portico, engaging in random chatter punctuated here and there by laughs as they moseyed down the broad steps to their cars or away on foot.

The one who had to be Dickinson was among the last, lingering just outside the entrance with someone Bachardy guessed to be Rev. Kiel. He was dressed in black and sporting a clerical collar, a Bible tucked under his arm, his hands clasping hers. About her age, midthirties. Almost as pretty as Dickinson. Whatever the minister was telling her drew a nod of acknowledgment and a reluctant smile in the tricky light. He released his grip and studied Dickinson as she hurried down the steps, then retreated inside the church.

Dickinson beeped open the relatively new red Mustang parked a few cars down from Bachardy's Camry. Bachardy started the ignition and gave her half a block before switching on the lights and pulling after her. Five minutes and two and a half miles later, she turned onto Buckingham Road, a pretty-as-a-picture street not much different from Wellington Road. She curved left into the driveway eight homes up as the garage door rose. A minute later, it closed behind her.

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With no idea who else might be inside, Franklin Bachardy called it quits for the night.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to take her out.

The day after, it came to that.

He'd find a motel and phone to let them know it was Dickinson, for real this time. They wouldn't care if it was done tomorrow or the day after, just so it got done, clean and simple or down and dirty. Either way. Just so it got done. What he was paid for, the what, not the *how.*

The rap-a-tap-tap on the door woke him and had become a louder buhm-badda-boom-boom by the time he got to the spy hole, figuring to see it was housekeeping ignoring the DO NOT DISTURB hanging from the knob. He was ready to shout them a piece of his mind, though the bedside clock was reading ten, three hours past the time he'd requested for his wakeup call. No matter which direction he was traveling or for how long, jet lag always did that to Bachardy.

It was the deputy, Grange, smiling back at the peep like he knew he was being checked out. He retreated a step to better show off the two paper cups of Starbucks.

Bachardy opened the door the length of the chain and gave Grange a questioning look.

"Morning, Agent Bachardy. You had a block on your phone or I would've called ahead," Grange said. "Besides, the snack room coffee machine here at Ida's Cozy Motel delivers somebody's idea of a joke, where what I got here for us is the kind of he-man caffeine that could jump-start a cadaver."

"Something else?"

The deputy's head did a combination nod and shake. "To do with Lizzie Morrow. Something I figured you should know."

Bachardy slipped the chain.

Grange settled at the desk, blew on his coffee, and checked out the room while Bachardy threw on his robe, grabbed for a cigarette, lit up, and came after the other cup of Starbucks, Grange telling him, "Watch those first sips. Hot as blazes."

Bachardy removed the lid and excused himself to the bathroom. Back in a few moments to say, "My little trick. Add some tap water, just enough to cool, and no worry about burning your mouth." He settled on the edge of the bed, the side closest to Grange, his .38 under the pillow and in easy reach. There was something discomforting about a lawman showing up unannounced this time of morning. At any time. "What's this you have to tell me about Lizzie Morrow?"

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Grange adjusted his wire-frames on his face. "She knows you're on her case."

"How's that?"

"Not you, exactly. Somebody. She called the station last night, sounding scared, saying how she was certain she'd been followed home from prayer meeting. Looking out her window and telling me she had a feeling whoever it was now was outside, lurking in the dark. Lizzie's never been one to see the sky falling, so I played along with her. Went on over to her place and made like I was checking after her safety, all the while knowing it was you."

"You didn't say anything, did you? Tell her?"

Grange gave him a *What do you take me for?* kind of look. "I'm not one to get in front of a federal operation, no sir, not me, Agent Bachardy." He gentled off the lid of the cup and finger-tested the coffee. Took a sip, then another. "Told Lizzie to try and have a decent night's sleep and that we'd be running some patrols. Call for any reason, which she did this morning—sounding tired—to say she spent half the night at the window, but it must've been her imagination playing tricks, and thank you." He took a gulp of coffee, which he used as a mouth rinse. "With all due respect, if it were up to me, I'd think seriously about getting on with whatever business brought you here after her."

"Does Ms. Morrow share her home with anyone?"

"Nothing on two feet, at least, nothing permanent, and nobody inclined to stay on to sunrise, if you catch my drift. A giant mutt she found wandering the street, deaf and a mute, what loves to be scratched behind the ear. Two Siamese cats what live in their own world, come and go as they please."

"You sound like you know her well."

"Never after sunrise," the deputy said.

"How about now? You tag along with me?" The suggestion seemed to please the deputy. "Her seeing a familiar face at the front door would ease any alarm she might still be feeling about last night. Make my job that much easier."

Grange gave Bachardy a thumbs up. "How about this? I call her to say how I'm dropping by to check up on her welfare?" He was already reaching after his cell phone. "Make sure she'll be there waiting for us."

Bachardy answered with his own thumbs up.

Grange, so pleasant, so eager, so close to being dead, Bachardy almost wished the option was to let the deputy live, but he'd learned years ago, the hard way, trial and error, that leaving no witnesses was the only way to avoid being identified, caught, and convicted.

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Poor Geller. Geller always came to mind at times like these. Geller, the one who taught him caution, then went and blew it himself over some woman, not so much as a looker, as someone who reminded him of his sainted mother. Nothing about Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow spelled m-o-t-h-e-r. But under different circumstances, he would have enjoyed riding the merry-go-round with Dickinson. Might even have stayed past sunrise.

Something made Bachardy flash on the gas jockey from last night, the look the guy had given him. But he reminded himself, *out of sight, out of mind.* No reason to think it would go any differently this time. Except—the feeling. He'd had the feeling once or twice before and he'd played off it. *Better safe than sorry.* No chance his getting directions to the sheriff's substation would come back to haunt him if he deep fried the gas jockey. The lesson of Geller. So, okay. First things first: Dickinson. And second things second: the deputy sheriff. Then, third, his farewell to this hiccup of a town: the gas jockey.

"Done," Grange said, snapping the cell closed. "She's putting the pot on to go with her gingerbread muffins, says she may be out back in the garden pruning her roses, so the door'll be unlocked and to just barge right in. How's that for easy, Agent Bachardy?"

"I'd say you're in for some special recognition, Deputy."

"Suits me fine. This business has me thinking I might yet try out for the FBI. My knock-knock joke nowhere around to point me otherwise anymore, us gone our separate ways, and that badge, still a real winner. You think, if I do—apply—you might sign off on me?"

"Count on me for that," Bachardy said.

Grange banged out notes with the knocker a second and third time before there was the clacking sound of the door handle depressing and the door swung open. Instead of Ellen Dickinson, Bachardy found himself staring back at Rev. Kiel from last night. If there'd been any question at all about who he was, Kiel's clerical collar resolved that. He was better looking in daylight, except for two rows of canary-colored teeth that formed a welcoming smile for Grange. The smile surrendered to curiosity when he realized Grange was not alone.

"Lizzie didn't mention you were bringing a friend, Billy."

Grange tossed his palms into an *oh yeah* gesture. "Sure there's enough coffee in the pot and muffins to go around, wouldn't you say, Jerry?"

"Lizzie's never been one to prepare for less than an army," the minister agreed, and both men laughed. "Come in, come in, come in, Mr.—?"

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"Bachardy." He took Rev. Kiel's outstretched hand, large and calloused, not what he would have figured for a minister. "Franklin Bachardy." A solid hold, a hearty pump that Kiel seemed almost reluctant to quit.

"Franklin, what a wonderfully old-fashioned name. It fits you, Franklin. It fits you." The minister stepped aside. He ushered Bachardy and Grange inside, then closed and locked the door behind them. "Two steps and a right turn gets you to the living room, Franklin. The couch, any chair will do. Lizzie likes that one—" he pointed "—for herself. Says it's best for her back, but it looks gosh darn uncomfortable to me. To you too, Billy?"

"Looks like it gives more backaches than it cures, Jerry. You fellas go on. I'll go on out back and fetch her."

"Remind her to leave the fresh cuts out for now, Billy." The minister settled in the chair across the coffee table from the one Bachardy had chosen. "They inspire my asthma when they're fresh cut," he said, ruefully. "Not only roses. How's your respiratory system, Franklin? You one of the lucky ones don't know what allergies are all about?"

"Some hay fever now and then," Bachardy said, struggling to find a comfortable position, crossing one leg over the other, patting himself like he was after his cigarettes, but actually needing to feel the comfort of the .38 packed under his left arm, thinking how he now had to consider popping the minister if he was going to bring off this hit at all, right now. Three scores here, the gas jockey on his way out of town—four pops where he was only being paid for one, the woman, Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow. Maybe wait for a better time? he wondered, and at once answering himself. *No. Get it over and done with. Scram the town. Let the clients know. The extra pops no charge, with my compliments. An investment in my own survival. Get the clients off my back once and for all. Collect the balance due and then maybe a couple months R&R, the QE2 cruise I've been thinking about, or maybe just to Hawaii.*

Bachardy found the pack. He lit up. Pushed a jet stream at the ceiling. Gave his thigh an anxious rub, psyched out the room for a game plan that would let him take care of business wham-bam, thank you, ma'am with the least effort.

Sound would be a problem, he decided. One shot, neighbors were likely to figure it for a car backfiring. Same with the second shot. The third shot, that was going to bring puzzlement and maybe someone dialing 9-1-1. The sofa was loaded with throw pillows. Heist one of them, use it as a muffler. Not the best solution, but it would have to do in a pinch.

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The minister was saying, ". . . cigarettes don't bother me, personally, although I am concerned about secondhand smoke. I do two sermons a year about the evils of tobacco—lung congestion and other long-term problems. Franklin, did you know cigarettes cause more deaths from heart attacks than from cancer?" Nodding in accord. "An absolute fact. Studies in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and all. You can find out for yourself up on the Internet."

"Heard it said." Bachardy wished the minister would shut up and wondered what was keeping Grange and the woman. He pulled the cancer stick from his lips, gave it a fast study, and checked around for an ashtray. No ashtray. He extinguished the cigarette on his sole and field stripped it inside the jacket pocket where he kept his backup, a short-barrelled .22—thinking, *the .22, less noise, so maybe better to use than the .38?*—before he was momentarily startled by the door chimes.

Rev. Kiel bounced up, motioning Bachardy to stay put, and padded out.

Bachardy put the time to use. He shifted onto the sofa and stored the .38 under a throw pillow he repositioned closer to his right hand. On reflection, he returned the .38 to his shoulder holster and substituted the .22, with not a second to spare.

The minister was back, and he wasn't alone.

Bachardy remembered seeing the black woman leaving the church last night. She was impossible to miss, her three or four hundred pounds on a frame that could not be more than five-one, five-two, but she carried herself with a ballet dancer's grace underneath a multi-hued muumuu that defied anyone not to notice her.

"Mr. Bachardy, say hello to Alice Jefferson. Alice is my star vocalist, the choir nothing without her. Dropped by to work with Lizzie on her selections for next Sunday's services. Lizzie's our wonderful organist, or did Billy tell you so already?"

"So," Bachardy said.

"Oh, go on, Pastor," Alice Jefferson said, her robust voice feigning modesty. "Oh, go on . . . I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Bachardy." Searching the room. "Where is that girl? We got some serious rehearsing to do. . . . Let me guess. The garden. Her and them roses of hers. A thorn in my side, it comes to keeping enough time for rehearsing." Her laugh did not trill true.

Rev. Kiel said, "Settle down, relax, Alice. Someone's already gone to fetch her."

Alice Jefferson mumbled another thought and moved in the direction of the sofa. Bachardy, fearing she would pick a spot that obliged her to move the throw pillow under which he'd hidden the .22,

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quickly shifted over and patted the space to his left. Using the armrest for support, the woman made a soft landing. She deposited the songbooks she'd brought with her on the coffee table, wheezed a comfort sigh, and settled her arms along the back of the sofa.

Bachardy reassessed the situation while she recited a catalog of song possibilities for the minister. So now he had another complimentary corpse to create. Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow, as originally bought and paid for. The deputy sheriff, the minister, and the choir singer, three on the house in the house. The gas jockey before leaving town. Five for the price of one. How's that for a bargain? Man, would the newspapers and the TV ever have a field day, all sorts of speculation about some devil-possessed killer with a grudge against the church, probably all of mankind, before the story made it onto *Law & Order* and finally wore out its welcome. He didn't even want to think about what special guest they'd hire to play him, but hoping it wouldn't be Christopher Walken or somebody like him, who would portray Bachardy as a sick, psychopathic, perverted prick of a human being. Walken, he was good at that, where somebody like that Macy guy or that Reilly guy could make him the victim of circumstance that he was, only trying to do his job and get on with his life.

With an apologetic look at Bachardy, Rev. Kiel began evaluating the proposed songs and dropping in a few personal choices.

Bachardy looked anxiously at the archway and thought about strolling out to the garden to see for himself what was keeping Dickinson and the deputy. He decided to give it a few more minutes and began drafting a new scenario for the hits.

Latch onto the throw pillow and the .22 rising to greet Dickinson. *Blam*. Drop Dickinson. *Blam*. Drop the deputy. A shift to the left. *Blam*. Send the minister to Heaven. Wheel around. *Blam*. Send Alice Jefferson to that great choir in the clouds. What? Four seconds? Five? A minute to check his handiwork. Possibly the need for a *coup de grace*, although that was doubtful; his accuracy was as good as Nowitzki at the free throw line, Bowen on three-pointers, Kobe on anything. Better, actually—he himself had been at it longer and had no scars to show for time served. Bachardy's Greatest Hits and not a clinker in the bunch.

The mutt Grange had mentioned, a blimp of a dog, wandered into the room and over to Bachardy. Sniffed his leg and, satisfied, backed off and did a slow merry-go-round with his tail before settling down on the rug.

The minister interrupted his conversation with Alice Jefferson to explain, "That's Ludwig. Deaf as a stone."

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"I heard," Bachardy said.

"More than Ludwig could say," Rev. Kiel said, earning a laugh from Alice and a play smile from Bachardy, while Ludwig found a spot on his hairy paw to gnaw.

Rev. Kiel resumed lobbying for some hymn called, best Bachardy could tell, *God Be With You Till We Meet Again,* which instantly earned the enthusiasm of Alice Jefferson, who began singing the lyrics in a voice that started low and slow and was soaring by the time Bachardy realized she'd been joined by a younger-edged soprano singing harmony.

He trailed the sound to the archway.

The girl was addressing her singing to a Siamese cat she was stroking. She was a junior-sized version of Alice Jefferson, maybe ten or eleven years old, and decked out in a fluffy pink dress and matching ribbons braided through pigtails.

The two of them finished the hymn in perfect harmony, to generous applause and shouts of "Bravo!" from the minister. The Siamese, having heard enough, slipped out of the girl's arms and disappeared.

"Mama, you coming yet? I don't want to be late for Ruthie Mae's birthday!"

Alice Jefferson glanced from Rev. Kiel to Bachardy and explained, "She's best friends with my Sally over there. . . . Any minute now, precious. I still need to have a conversation with Miss Morrow about Sunday. You like for us to sing that one on Sunday?"

Sally Jefferson shrugged.

Her mother said, "You go on back to the car, precious. Only be another minute or five."

"Wait here with you, Mama," Sally said, and skipped over to the baby grand piano that dominated the area immediately in front of the picture window. She tucked her skirt and settled on the bench, and with a super-sized smile for Bachardy, began one-fingering *God Be With You Till We Meet Again* and humming along.

The sound transcribed in Bachardy's mind as a TV newscaster saying: *The killer's victims also included a sweet, adorable ten-year-old girl named Sally, who had a beautiful voice. She looking forward to her best friend's birthday party and had every reason to believe she'd have a long, happy, healthy life—*

No, no, no. No way.

Bachardy knew he was a lot of things, all of them rotten, but one thing he wasn't, never could be, was a kid killer. Bachardy drew the line at kids. He'd do Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow, but not here and now. Later. He'd come back and do her—but not the dog. Kids and dogs. He had one of each back home, two more kids with

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his ex, and that one in Santa Fe with . . . he couldn't remember her name. It was being crowded out of his memory by some fast, fancy thinking.

Bachardy checked his watch, slapped his forehead like he'd had a sudden thought, and pushed himself off the sofa. He threw up his hands and shared a concerned look with the minister and Alice Jefferson. "Didn't realize the time. Another appointment in town I can't be late for. Explain and apologize to Ms. Morrow for me, will you? And to Deputy Grange . . . I'll make it back here another time."

He started quick-stepping to the hallway but was halted by the minister saying, "Aren't you forgetting something, Franklin?" Rev. Kiel was pointing at the sofa.

Bachardy turned and saw Alice Jefferson with the .22 in hand and aimed at him. Then the weapon disappeared underneath the throw pillow that was now on her lap, before little Sally had been able to turn from the keyboard and see what the minister was talking about now.

Alice Jefferson converted her firm stare into a smile and said to her, "Go to the car and wait for your mama."

"But, Mama!"

"Just do what Mama says, Sally. Now. Scoot. You listening? You hear me? I don't see you moving any, Sally."

Sally made a ten-year-old face of discontent and worked off the piano bench, headed out of the room with her shoulders hunched, her fists clenched, muttering what to Bachardy sounded like, *I never get to watch.*

Once satisfied she was gone from the house, Alice revealed the .22 again, telling the minister, "Let's hurry up on this, Jerry. My baby needs to get to her birthday party."

The minister advanced on Bachardy, cautiously, careful not to enter Alice's line of fire. He reached around and dug the .38 out from Bachardy's shoulder holster. He pressed the .38 between Bachardy's shoulder blades. "That chair there will do just fine, Franklin," he said. "Sit down and take a load off."

Alice said, "You still need me any more, Jerry?"

"I know. The kid's birthday party. You done good for us. Go on out back and pass the word to Lizzie and Billy and take off." The minister inched backward from Bachardy and into the seat across from him, the .38 primed to excavate his chest. "Lizzie and Billy will be with us any minute, Franklin. Then, it'll be time for show and tell. And you can spill your guts—or I'll have to spill them for you."

Bachardy stared at him hard and said, "You'd really kill an FBI agent?"

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The minister hooted. "As if the FBI has anything at all to do with you, Franklin, or whatever your real name is."

With Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow working over the piano keyboard, *God Be With You Till We Meet Again* sounded a hundred times better than when little Sally was tinkering it out. "It's a good choice for Sunday, Jerry, and isn't that girl a marvel, the way she picks up so fast on music? Carnegie Hall, I wouldn't *not* predict it."

"A damn sight better'n her winding up in juvenile hall," Deputy Bill Grange said, admiring his own sense of humor. He was standing alongside Bachardy, the throw pillow in one hand, the .22 in the other. "Jerry, can we get this show on the road?"

The minister settled back in his seat, one hand across his belly, using it as a perch for his gun hand, as Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow struck some dramatic chords.

Bachardy, meanwhile, thinking: *Move fast enough and get my hands on the .22. Use Grange as a shield while taking out Kiel. Pop Grange; then, the woman.* Thinking: *I'll have surprise working for me. It could be enough. I've been in tighter spots than this and lived to tell . . .*

"Billy, here, read you the minute you pulled the FBI gag on him," the minister said.

"Before then, Jerry. Why I got on the phone to you pronto."

"He wasn't the first, either. Phil over at the garage also smelled trouble when you pulled in."

Bachardy said, "You do me, they'll only send someone else looking for her. She can't hide forever."

"We'll have for them the same as we have for you," Rev. Kiel replied.

Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow began playing the song from *The Sound of Music* with all the goodbye words in different languages.

Bachardy decided the moment had come, deciding: *On the count of ten . . .*

He was at "six" when Ellen Dickinson a k a Lizzie Morrow switched back to *God Be With You Till We Meet Again.*

Bachardy heard a dull pop. Understood it was the sound of a .22 shell cracking through a pillow, was aware of the minister bending over to whisper in his ear, "God be with you till we meet again."

Three weeks later, Deputy Billy Grange was explaining to the stranger who had come calling, "The knock-knock joke got in the way."

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TRICKS

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

No tricks. That was Larry Erie's goal for Halloween. No toilet paper in his trees. No soap on his car. No rotten eggs splattered against the side of his house.

The year before, Erie had been in a daze. Newly widowed, newly retired, he hadn't even realized it was Halloween until the doorbell rang and he found Batman, Yoda, and a Powerpuff Girl on his front porch. The only "treats" he had on hand were Oreo cookies, so that's what they got. When those ran out, he tried giving away bananas, but most of the kids refused to take them. After a while, Erie just turned off the lights and stopped answering the doorbell.

The next morning, he had to hose down the front of the house, drive to a carwash, and pick long sheets of Charmin from the branches of his elm trees.

So this year, Erie was prepared. He'd asked Andrew Smith, one of the few teenagers he knew, what kind of treats kids really want.

"Everybody loves Snickers," Andrew told him. "And Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. What you don't want to give out is that cheap chewy crap in the orange and black wrappers. Or fruit. Man, that'll get you egged before midnight!"

Erie figured Andrew knew what he was talking about. He was a troubled seventeen year old his buddy Bass had informally adopted, and Erie had a hunch the kid had thrown more than a few rotten eggs himself over the years. So he followed Andrew's advice, and the day before Halloween he'd bought enough Snickers and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups to feed a small army—which was exactly how Erie thought of trick-or-treaters. They were like little Vikings who invade once a year, sacking and pillaging the villages that don't give in to their demands for candy.

Come Halloween morning, Erie was sitting in his kitchen sipping coffee and munching on a Snickers, figuring there were more than enough to get him through the day unscathed. Then the phone rang.

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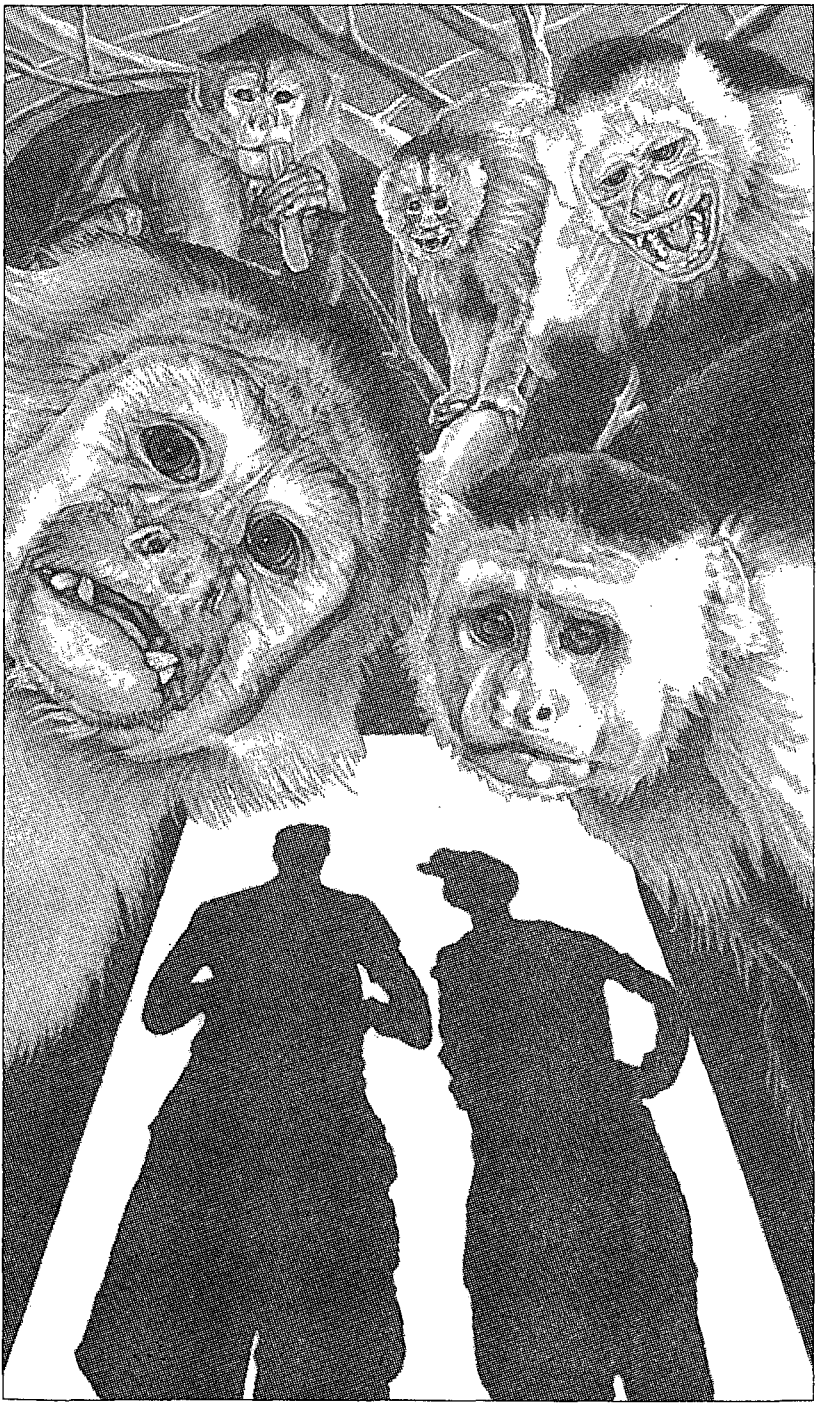

Ron Chironna

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"Hello?"

"Morning, Larry! Cy Reed here. I was wondering if you were up to anything just now."

"Uhhh . . . no. Not really."

"Good! Why don't you come on over to the zoo then? I've got a little problem that could use the Larry Erie touch."

"Oh. What kind of problem?"

"I'll fill you in when you get here. So I'll see you in—what? Fifteen minutes maybe?"

"Well, I—"

"Alright, twenty then. It's a bit of an emergency, so the sooner the better. And of course I know I can rely on your legendary discretion."

"Oh. Sure. But I—"

"Great! See you soon!"

Click.

Erie hung up, then simply stood there, staring at the phone. After a few seconds, he turned away and poured himself more coffee. Caffeine, that's what he needed. Because he wasn't sure if that phone call had been real or a dream.

The first and last time Erie had spoken to Cy Reed had been six weeks before. A neighborhood girl had asked Erie to track down her dog, and the trail led to a couple of hard-core rednecks who picked up beer money selling roadkill to the local zoo. When they couldn't find enough dead deer and half-flattened skunks, it turned out, they supplemented their haul with people's pets. So Erie had marched into the Hoosier Zoological Garden and Wildlife Refuge, cornered the man in charge, and announced that if he found out any more dogs and cats were being turned into tiger chow he was going to take the story straight to the *Herald-Times.*

The man in charge was Cy Reed, and his reaction wasn't the one Erie had expected. He didn't deny everything. He didn't throw around words like "slander" and "libel" and "lawsuit." He didn't call for security guards to come drag Erie away. Instead he nodded sadly and said, "Don't worry, Mr. Erie. It won't happen again."

They were in Reed's office, and around them on the walls were pictures of the zoo director with local politicians and celebrities and well-dressed men and women Erie assumed were big-time donors. Reed had been a River City fixture for years, showing up on call-in shows and at street fairs and parades, usually with a parrot on his shoulder or a lion cub in his lap, always shilling for the Hoosier Zoo.

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A man like that had to be smooth. He had to know how to tell people what they wanted to hear. Erie fixed him with a hard gaze, unwilling to let his guard down. "Really?"

"Really," Reed said. He was an elderly man, perhaps a full decade older than Erie, and he seemed to shrivel into an empty husk in the blink of an eye. "I'm not as sharp as I used to be. The details around here—they're getting harder to keep track of every day. So I rely on my people. And . . . you know we're a small zoo. We don't have money just lying around. So people look for ways to cut corners. Sometimes they—"

Reed banged the palm of his hand on the desk before him, and suddenly he seemed years younger.

"But those are excuses. Here's what you want to hear. I've been told all about that 'meat' we bought, and it sickened me as much as it sickened you. The appropriate parties have been disciplined, and new rules have been put in place to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again."

Erie had learned a lot during his thirty-three years as a cop, and one of the most useful was how to spot a liar. But as much as he sensed that Reed was a professional BSer, Erie couldn't detect any B.S. in what the man had just said.

"Good," Erie said. "That *is* what I wanted to hear."

"So we can consider this matter closed?"

Erie knew what that meant. Reed wasn't really asking whether "the matter" would stay closed. He was asking about Erie's mouth.

"Like I said before, as long as I don't hear about anything else like this . . ." Erie shrugged. "Sure. It's closed."

Reed stood up and reached a withered hand across the desk to Erie. Erie took it, and they shook.

"I'm glad we understand each other," Reed said. He stepped around his desk. "You're a private detective, you say."

It didn't sound like a question, so Erie didn't treat it like one. If he had, the answer would have been "Occasionally," which always led to follow-up questions Erie didn't like. He was retired and he had nothing better to do and sometimes things happened, that's all. It always sounded dumb to say it.

Reed pointed at one of the framed photographs on the wall. "So tell me, Mr. Private Eye. Who do you think that is?"

Erie squinted at the picture, then turned to Reed and smiled. "That would be you. With Marlin Perkins."

Reed grinned. "You're good. I'd say that young man up there looks about as much like me as an egg looks like a pile of chicken bones. You know, I worked for ol' Marlin at the Lincoln Park Zoo

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up in Chicago. A fine man. He told me something once I've never forgotten . . ."

"Ol' Marlin" had said a lot of interesting things, as it turned out. Erie politely listened to Reed spin tales for almost half an hour before a portly, bearded man walked in without knocking and started handing Reed papers to sign.

"Sorry, Larry. Duty calls," Reed had said, and Erie left the zoo actually liking the man.

And now, a month and a half later, he was going back to see Reed again. On his way to the zoo, Erie wondered exactly what kind of problem would require "the Larry Erie touch."

When he walked up to the front gate, a zoo employee was washing something that looked like blood off the turnstiles.

"You Leary?" the woman asked him.

"Uhhh, no. Not quite. Larry Erie."

"Yeah, you're the guy. Overbeck said you could take a look at this if you got here before I was done."

She slapped her sponge into a bucket of pink suds. The water sloshed, sending the smell of ammonia into the air. The woman leaned against the ticket booth nearby, pulled off her rubber gloves, and lit a cigarette.

"Who's Overbeck?"

"Assistant director," she said. "Go on. Have at it."

"What exactly am I having at?"

The woman shrugged and blew out a cloud of smoke. "I don't think I'm supposed to have an opinion," she said.

Erie leaned in close to the metal bars of the turnstiles. There were three sets of three, rising from ankle level to waist level to shoulder level. They were wrapped in a cage of more bars, and the only way for a paying customer to get in or out of the zoo was to step up to the turnstiles, grab one, and move forward, like using a revolving door. Most of the red smears were on one of the middle bars—where someone would take hold and push. The smears looked like they'd been fingerprints before the ammonia began working on them.

"Who told you to wipe this off?"

"Overbeck."

Erie looked at the bars again, scowling. If some kind of crime had been committed, why destroy crucial evidence?

"It's ten thirty," the woman said, answering the question she could read on his face. "We open in half an hour."

"Ah-ha. Right."

"You done there?"

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"Yeah, I guess."

"Then come on in. They're waiting for you in the Monkey House."

Erie moved through the turnstiles by using his foot to push the lowest bar. He didn't ask for directions. He could have found his destination blindfolded thanks to the unmistakable odor that pointed the way like a neon arrow.

The Monkey House was the first big building in the zoo, up a path past a ramshackle souvenir shop. The monkeys and apes were free to go in and out, moving from outdoor chain-link cages to barred indoor habitats as they pleased. As Erie approached the entrance, he spotted a pair of lemurs swinging happily on ropes. Across from them, in another cage, sat a big, gray-bearded chimpanzee. There were other chimps roaming around listlessly behind the fence with him, but he was different. He was watching Erie.

The old chimp was perched on a large rock and had something clutched in the long, curled fingers of his right hand. The ape lifted the hand out toward Erie as he got closer, as if offering him something. Curious, Erie stopped.

"Hello," he said.

The chimp lifted his right arm up over his head, then brought it back down. Was that a wave? Erie smiled.

"He wants you to come closer."

Erie turned to see a fiftyish woman stepping out of the Monkey House. Her salt-and-pepper hair was spiky short, and she had piercing green eyes that glared at him through wire-rimmed glasses. She was wearing a zoo uniform.

"Why?" Erie asked her.

"So he can hit you with the dung he's got in his hand."

Erie took another look at what the chimp was holding, then backed away from the cage.

"Why does he throw dung at people?"

The woman gave him a "Well, *duh*" look. "Because he thinks it's funny," she said. "So you're the detective, huh?"

Erie nodded, aware that he'd already failed to impress the woman with his keen powers of observation and deduction.

"Yeah," he said. "Larry Erie. And you are?"

"Bea Huff. The curator."

She rushed over the words, not offering to shake his hand.

"Come on. You better a get a good look at the scene of the crime before it gets hosed down."

She turned and headed into the Monkey House, pushing through a pair of metal doors with glass windowpanes. One of the

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windows had been shattered, and the shards crackled under Erie's feet as he followed the woman into the building.

Cy Reed was waiting inside with another zoo employee—the bearded man who'd barged into Reed's office six weeks before. The man was nervous energy incarnate, with wide eyes and sweat-soaked underarms, but Reed was all smiles.

"Larry! Thanks for coming on such short notice."

He moved forward using an ornately carved cane—though he didn't seem to have a limp—and shook Erie's hand. Erie was surprised at first by the strength of the old man's grip, but then he remembered who Reed was—the kind of man who'd still be conjuring up charming smiles and hearty handshakes on his deathbed.

"This is Bill Overbeck, my right-hand man."

The bearded man stepped up and gave Erie's hand a shake that was all the more limp and moist in comparison to Reed's.

"And you've already met Bea, I take it."

"I rescued him from Corny," Huff said.

Reed chuckled and shook his head. "That old devil. If only they'd kidnapped *him*."

"There'd be a hell of a lot more blood, that's for sure," Huff said.

Erie held up his hands. "Hold on, guys. Maybe you better tell me what's going on."

Reed nodded. "Right. Of course. Well, you see, Larry, we're a small operation without the budget to—"

Erie prepared himself for a few minutes of spin, but Huff spared him by interrupting her boss.

"One of our animals is missing," she said flatly. "A young capuchin monkey named Maggie. When I came in this morning, she was gone, and the capuchin habitat looked like that."

She pointed toward one of the cages nearby. Erie didn't see anything out of the ordinary at first, just faux rock walls and a jumble of ropes and tire swings. But then a red smear caught his eye, and he moved closer.

There were two doors in the cage—a big one for humans, and a smaller one for the monkeys. The monkey door led outside, to an enclosure identical to the one where Corny sat, luring victims closer like a hairy siren. The human door had two bloody streaks near the knob.

Erie wanted to find out where that door went. He wanted to get a closer look at those streaks of blood. He wanted to get to work.

But he stopped himself.

"Call the police," he said.

Reed smiled grimly and shook his head. Huff glared at

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Overbeck. Overbeck turned pale and stammered, "We've already . . . we can't . . . no. We decided. No police. Right, Cy?"

"We've already got problems with security, Larry," Reed said. "You've got to build zoos like prisons these days just to keep the real animals out. This place is nearly fifty years old. Any half-wit could break in here with a ladder and a rope."

"Or less," Huff added bitterly.

Reed shot her a long-suffering paternal glance before continuing. "And the truth of the matter is we simply don't have the funds to do anything about it. As you know, Larry, we've barely got enough money to keep the animals fed. We certainly don't have an extra hundred thousand to spend on motion detectors and silent alarms."

"That's too bad. But it still doesn't explain why you're not reporting a serious crime to the police."

"Copycats," Overbeck said.

"Excuse me?"

"Copycats," Overbeck said again, nodding emphatically in agreement with himself.

"Bill's concern—and I happen to share it—is that we would be overrun by vandals, thieves, and thrill-seekers if people realized how vulnerable we are," Reed explained. "Just two months ago we ran off a dozen college kids skinny-dipping in the duck pond. And last spring a couple of drunks broke in because they wanted to ride a zebra. One of them managed to shatter his pelvis, and now *he's* suing *us*. Can you imagine what would happen if it got out that you could actually get in here at night and steal a monkey? Our animals—all of them—would be in grave danger."

Reed was good. Oh yes. Once the man found his footing, he could really shovel it out.

And it was working too. Erie found that the guilt and sense of responsibility Reed was shifting onto his shoulders actually had some weight.

"So you want me to investigate?"

"Yes," Overbeck said.

"Quietly," Reed added.

Huff fumed wordlessly. It was obvious who'd been overruled that morning.

"I'll do what I can," Erie said. "But if I think there's something more serious than monkeynapping going on, I'll have to go to the police."

"Of course, Larry. Of course," Reed said.

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"It's not a 'monkeynapping,' " Huff snapped. "It's theft and it's cruelty and it *is* serious."

"Right. Sorry. No offense."

Huff didn't look appeased.

Erie turned away from her glare and pointed at the monkey cage. "So can I get up in there?"

"Follow me," Overbeck said. He headed for a door with the words ZOO PERSONNEL ONLY stenciled on it. Erie followed. So did Huff.

Overbeck pushed through the door into a small storage room and kitchen beyond, but Erie stopped to examine the knob. The metal around it was scratched and bent.

> **"It's obvious how the son of a bitch got hurt: The capuchins put up a fight. . . .**

"Crowbar," Erie said. He looked back at the building's south entrance, the one he'd come in through. "Once they smashed the glass back there, they could reach around and unlock the doors by hand. This one they had to jimmy."

Erie looked at the other side of the door. As he expected, there were smears of blood there. There was blood on the floor, too—a trail of tiny droplets, dried to black. The droplets led to another door. On it was a sign printed from someone's computer.

SECURE DOOR BEHIND YOU! it read. *SMART MONKEYS!!!*

"Whoever our bleeder is, he didn't cut himself on the glass breaking in," Erie said. "There's no blood on the outside of this door, no blood on the outside of the door into the monkey habitat. So he went in okay and came out not so okay."

"It's obvious how the son of a bitch got himself hurt," Huff said. "The capuchins wouldn't let strangers just stroll in there and grab Maggie. They'd put up a fight. We don't need a detective to tell us that."

Erie almost started to explain that he was just trying to form a mental picture of the night's events, that it wasn't good to jump to any conclusions—even the seemingly obvious ones—until there was physical evidence to back it up. But he didn't. For whatever reason, Huff didn't like him. An explanation wouldn't change that. So he decided to form his mental picture more quietly while she was around.

"Just how big are capuchins anyway?" he asked.

Huff held her hands a little over a foot apart.

"Yea big, not counting the tail. An adult male weighs about ten

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pounds, a female a little less. But don't let the size fool you. They can mess you up if they really want to."

"And they're all outside right now?"

Huff nodded. "Yeah. We closed off the access chute, so they can't get back in till we want 'em to."

Overbeck opened the door to the capuchin habitat. "It's safe, Harry. Come on," he said, his voice quivering with fussy anxiety.

Huff gestured toward the cage. "Yeah, better get a move on, *Harry,*" she said to Erie.

She was hostile, but at least she seemed to know that his name was Larry.

Erie ignored her. If he could get away with it, he'd make that his permanent policy. Erie followed Overbeck into the monkey habitat.

. . . We don't need a detective to tell us that."

Before he could begin searching for relevant details, he had to take a moment and force himself to block out the irrelevant one that immediately slapped him in the face. Even from a distance the zoo's apes and monkeys had a smell that was less than appealing. On the other side of the bars, the stench was downright appalling.

It was a struggle to keep his Snickers bar and coffee down, so he kept his tour of the habitat brief. There were more bloodstains on the floor, including the red outline of a footprint. Someone had stepped in blood, and it left behind the kind of print detectives love. It was so clear Erie recognized the brand (Nike) and could make a good guess on the size (twelve at least, thirteen and a half at most—big).

The footprint was in a back corner of the habitat, where the concrete floor met the fake rock wall. There were more bloodstains concentrated there than anywhere else. Erie crouched down and examined the wall. Caught in its rough, yellow surface, about a foot off the ground, was a tuft of fuzzy white fabric about the size of a quarter.

"You're not really going to hose all this down, are you?" he said over his shoulder.

"Well . . . yeah. We are," Overbeck said. "I mean, we don't have any choice. We can't keep the monkeys outside forever. And we certainly can't have them sitting around in blood. It's a . . . a sanitary . . . a health issue."

"A P.R. issue, you mean," Huff snorted.

Erie glanced back at them. Overbeck was hovering nearby, the

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moist stains under his armpits growing larger. Huff was leaning in the doorway, giving Overbeck the kind of look most people save for insects they find in their food. Erie figured the Hoosier Zoo had some very bumpy days ahead of it if Overbeck and Huff were the only ones waiting in the wings for Reed to retire.

Erie turned back to the white fluff on the wall, debating whether or not he should take it. On the one hand, it wouldn't do him much good: He didn't have a crime lab in his garage. On the other hand, it would be a shame to let a high-pressure hose blast potential evidence down the drain. After a few moments of indecision, he reached out, plucked the material off the wall, and put it in his wallet.

"Okay," Erie said, standing up. "Anything else I need to see?"

"No, that's it." Overbeck looked down at his watch, obviously eager to get the place cleaned up before the general public began strolling in.

"Nobody saw or heard anything out of the ordinary?"

"No. Nothing. I mean . . . other than what you've looked at already." Overbeck was backing toward the door as he spoke, trying to draw Erie out of the habitat. "We just came in this morning and Maggie was gone."

Erie followed reluctantly. A part of him felt like he was betraying something by leaving. He was abandoning a footprint, blood samples, maybe fingerprints, all kinds of evidence that he should have been protecting. But he had no badge to protect it with. So he left it behind.

"Don't you have security guards?" Erie asked as they rejoined Reed. "A night watchman or something?"

"Ha!" Huff scoffed. "We've got a 'something.' "

"Percy Williams is our night keeper," Reed said without looking at Huff. "Unfortunately, he must've been in another part of the zoo when Maggie was stolen."

"Yeah," Huff said. "The part where he keeps his TV and beer."

Overbeck fidgeted and eyed Reed warily, gauging his reaction. He didn't have one. Reed just kept smiling at Erie as if Huff hadn't said a thing.

If they'd been a family, Erie would've told them to go straight into therapy.

"So what kind of person steals a monkey?" he asked.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to tell us that," Reed said.

"You don't have any ideas? I mean—is there a black market for zoo animals?"

"No," said Overbeck.

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"Yes," said Huff.

"Not really," Reed said, talking over both of them. "Not for capuchins, not around here. Maybe if we were in Costa Rica . . ."

Reed chuckled. No one else joined in.

"I'm sorry we can't give you more to go on, Larry. But you're a resourceful man. I'm sure if anybody can bring Maggie home, it's you."

Pep talks were all well and good, but Erie preferred leads. He eyed Huff, but she wasn't saying anything more. She was too busy impaling a squirming Overbeck on another nasty glare.

As a former cop, Erie knew all too well that there was nothing less pleasant than stepping into the middle of a family argument. That's just what this felt like, and he hated it. He missed his job sometimes, but not crap like this. Why had he picked up the phone that morning? Why had he gotten out of bed?

"You'll hear from me," he said, and after a handshake and more rah-rah from Reed, he left.

When he was outside, he walked past the lemurs and chimpanzees—keeping a safe distance between himself and the chimps, just in case Corny decided to take a potshot at him—around to the next cage. The weathered, faded information plaque there identified the animals on the other side of the fence as capuchin monkeys. There were seven of them, and Erie recognized them immediately.

They were organ grinder monkeys. Not that Erie had ever seen a real organ grinder. But he'd seen enough in movies to know they always had the same little sidekick—monkeys with slender bodies and long tails and white faces with large, expressive eyes. Seven sets of those eyes were staring back at him now.

"Wraa!" one of the capuchins screeched as Erie got closer.

"Wraa!" another one answered, and then the rest joined in, all of them screaming and scrambling up into branches—out of reach.

Erie couldn't blame them for being jumpy after what had happened. He imagined the thieves chasing and grabbing at them inside the Monkey House. The animals' shrieking would've been even louder in there, bouncing off all that cement and metal. The perps must've had nerves of steel. Or stomachs of Budweiser.

Erie lingered just long enough to glance at the information plaque. For him, it was more informative for what it didn't say than what it said. There was nothing about capuchin monkeys being rare or endangered. Which meant, Erie assumed, that they weren't particularly valuable.

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There could be no argument, however, that they were particularly loud.

"Okay! I'm going! I'm going!" Erie told the monkeys when he was through. They didn't stop screaming until he was almost to the front gate.

The turnstiles at the entrance were gleaming clean when Erie reached them. The woman who'd been wiping them down was in the ticket booth now, reading a paperback novel.

"Excuse me. How are these locked up at night?"

The woman looked up from her book slowly, as if reluctant to leave its reality and reenter the one with the zoo and the guy asking nosy questions.

"What?" she asked.

"These turnstiles. How are they locked?"

"There's a lever around the side there, close to the ground. Push it down all the way and the bars lock up."

"Go ahead, Erie. Try it."

Erie turned to see Huff walking down the path toward him.

"That's the lever there. Step on it."

The lever had a pad on top, like a brake pedal. Erie put his foot on it and pushed, and the lever clicked downwards.

"Now watch."

Huff stepped up to the turnstile, grabbed one of the bars and gave it a loose shake.

"Locked, right?"

"If you say so."

"I don't."

Huff leaned into the turnstile, pushing against the direction it was designed to rotate. The lever popped up with a loud *clack*, and Huff moved slowly through the barred cage that surrounded the turnstile, pushing herself out of the zoo.

"That's all it takes," she said to Erie through the bars. "Except why bother when there's twenty places you can get in over a wall and twenty other places you can get in under a fence?"

"But this is the way they went last night."

"Obviously."

If Huff had been a little less of a smartass, a little less prone to jumping on people's words and stomping them into the dirt, he would've said something, maybe "Doesn't that suggest anything to you?" But instead he just walked through the turnstile—going in the right direction, unlike Huff—and headed for the parking lot.

"Well, thanks for the extra information. Every little bit helps."

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"Wait!"

Erie stopped and turned. Huff was following him.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To my car."

The look on her face said, "That's not funny."

"And after that?" she said slowly, as if speaking to someone for whom English was a challenging new language.

"After that I'm beginning my investigation."

When Huff realized that was all she was getting, she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

"Look, Erie," she said, her eyes popping back open, "Reed wants me to go with you."

"He *what?*"

It was official now. For the second year in a row, Erie's Halloween was ruined.

"What do you know about monkeys, Erie? What do you know about this monkey? Squat, that's what. I'm the expert, so I'm coming along. Reed's orders."

Erie didn't snap very often, but he snapped now.

"Excuse me? What makes you think I take orders from Reed?"

Huff cocked an eyebrow at him. There might have been genuine surprise on her face. Erie couldn't be sure.

"You mean you don't?"

"Why should I? I barely know him."

"You're working for him, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah," Erie said, realizing it for the first time. He hadn't even told Reed his rates. Not that he'd worked out what his rates were yet. This whole private investigator thing was still too damn new. "That doesn't make me his slave."

"So you're refusing to work with me?" There was a challenge in Huff's voice, almost as if she *wanted* him to say "Yes."

And he certainly was tempted. But he knew the logical thing to do, even if he didn't particularly want to do it.

"You can come with me," he said. "Because it makes sense, not because Cy Reed ordered it."

"Fine," Huff said, not seeming particularly satisfied by her victory.

They got in Erie's car, left the parking lot, went north on Lamprecht Road and east on Highway 50 toward downtown, all without saying a word. Huff finally broke the silence.

"Look," she said, and Erie wondered if an apology might be forthcoming. It wasn't. "When you hit 41 head north."

"What for?"

"We need to go to Spencer. You can pick up 67 off 41."

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"You think Maggie's in Spencer?"

Calling Spencer a dot on the map would be generous. It was more like a speck. Erie had driven through it a hundred times on his way to and from Indianapolis. Spencer was easy to drive through. It was harder to stop there. If you didn't hit the brakes at the city limits, you'd cruise through in a heartbeat. Erie didn't think of it as the kind of town that would be crawling with wildlife—other than rednecks.

"There's an animal dealer up around there named Eyler," Huff said. "Runs his own 'sanctuary' for exotics. He'd just love to get his hands on a young female capuchin. Good breeding stock. The babies are what really bring in the money."

They passed a sign for Highway 41. The turnoff was a mile ahead.

"This Eyler guy—he steals animals?"

"More or less."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it's complicated."

"It doesn't have to be complicated. When I say 'steal,' what I mean is 'sneak into a zoo, bust glass, pry open doors, chase monkeys around a cage, let one bite the hell out of him, then wrap it up and haul it out the front gate.' He'd do that?"

They passed another sign for 41. The turnoff was coming up.

"You need to get over."

"Would he do that?"

"You're going to miss the turn!"

Erie missed the turn.

"We're not going to Spencer," he said.

The look on Huff's face made Erie worry that she might be about to bite him.

"I knew it," she snarled.

"We can go later," Erie said quickly, hoping to head off the flood of abuse he saw coming his way. "If this Eyler guy stole Maggie, she's safe. She's merchandise, right? He'll take care of her. We've got time. But if she was grabbed for some other reason, she could be in danger."

"Some other reason? Like what?"

Erie made an effort to speak more slowly and softly, hoping it would rub off on Huff.

"I was a cop for a lot of years. I saw a lot of weird things. And the weirdest of all? Those were always on Halloween. Always."

"So what are you saying? Someone stole Maggie so they could dress her up like a ballerina and take her trick-or-treating?"

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"It wouldn't surprise me."

"Well, I don't buy it."

Huff turned away and slumped back in her seat. Erie knew the reason she couldn't "buy it." She'd already made up her mind. The animal dealer did it, she was thinking. With help.

And maybe she was right. If so, it might actually be good news. A motive makes a perp predictable. But if the bad guy's just out for some dumb laughs, anything can happen.

After a few quiet miles they reached downtown River City, and Erie zigzagged through the streets to the first stop of his investigation: St. Mary Mercy Hospital. When he parked, he told Huff to wait in the car.

"Yeah, right," Huff said as she unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door.

Erie didn't try to fight it. But as they walked toward the emergency entrance, he slipped off his windbreaker and handed it to her.

"Put this on."

Huff scowled back at him as if he'd just taken off his pants, not his jacket.

"I'm not cold," she said.

"I'm not trying to keep you warm. I'm trying to keep you anonymous."

Huff looked down at her shirt, with its Hoosier Zoo patch and the plastic tag with her name and title on it.

"Oh," she said.

She put on the jacket.

Erie needed to find a familiar face inside. He got lucky. There were two. He kicked his memory into high gear and came up with names to go with them. Then he glued a smile on his face he was far too irritated to feel.

"Jackie. Lee," he said as he walked up to the admitting nurses. "How you been?"

The two women smiled back.

"Detective Erie! It's been a long time!"

"We heard you retired."

"You heard right."

There was a brief round of chitchat about retirement, the cop who'd taken Erie's slot in Homicide, Jackie and Lee's complaints about supposedly arrogant doctors Erie could barely remember. Huff observed it all silently, ignored, until Jackie turned to her and said, "And who do we have here? Mrs. Erie?"

Erie managed to fake a small laugh and get in his response

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before Huff could open her mouth. "No, no. This is my friend Bea. I'm helping her out with a private matter. That's what brought me in today actually. I was hoping you could tell me if anyone came in last night with any serious bite wounds."

"Or scratches," Huff added.

"Yeah. Bites or scratches. Anything like that?"

Jackie and Lee exchanged a wry glance that either meant they both knew exactly which patient he was looking for or he'd simply supplied them with something juicy to gossip over once he was gone. When they looked back at Erie, Jackie gave him a shrug that told him it was the latter.

"All we had last night was the usual—drunks puttin' their fists through glass and women with black eyes and split lips cuz they 'walked into a door,' " she said.

"The big excitement was a guy with a kidney stone," Lee added, chuckling. "He was back there for hours carryin' on, screamin', callin' the doctors every filthy name you can think of."

"Oh yeah," Jackie said. "You shoulda heard what he called Dr. Adad. I've been thinkin' of sayin' the same thing to him for months!"

Everyone laughed, Erie out of politeness more than anything else. He'd struck out, and now he had to extricate himself smoothly before anyone asked . . .

"So what's this about bites and scratches, Detective Erie?" Lee said. "We got us a werewolf on the prowl?"

"Yeah. Or is it vampire?" Jackie threw in.

Erie's answer was still nothing more than a half-formed thought, hardly an idea, let alone words, when Huff spoke.

"Neither," she said. "It was my pit bull. He sure as hell sank his teeth into *somebody's* butt last night."

She leaned in closer to the nurses and dropped her voice to a just-between-us-girls whisper.

"Fortunately, I'm pretty sure the butt belonged to my ex."

Jackie and Lee ate it up. Erie took advantage of their laughter to throw out his goodbyes and steer Huff toward the door without any further conversation.

"Good save back there," he said once they were in the parking lot.

"So what now?"

"You're a smart lady. Guess."

"Knox Memorial Hospital."

"Very good! You ever moonlight as a detective?"

Huff didn't even crack a smile.

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River City's other hospital was twenty-five minutes away. The first ten minutes passed in silence. Erie had plenty he could say, most of it in the form of questions. But he just didn't feel like sticking his head into the lion's mouth. So it was Huff who spoke first, and when she did Erie knew the words had already been echoing through her brain for hours.

"What if it's her blood?"

Erie glanced over at Huff. Her face had changed. Anguish peeked out from behind the look of cynical disdain she'd been wearing since he met her.

"I don't know," he said. "You tell me."

"Even if she's barely hurt she could go into shock. Capture trauma. She could be dead already."

She tried to punch out the words, make them hard and clinical. But by the time she reached the word "shock" there was a tremor in her voice, and the last few words barely came out at all.

"Do you think it's her blood?" Erie asked.

Huff sucked in a long breath that seemed to fill the emptiness inside her, inflating her like a balloon.

"Hell no," she snapped, the other Huff, the tough one, back in charge. "She's a capuchin monkey. You think they're cute, just wait till one tries to scratch your eyes out. Anybody who'd try to snatch one out of a group like that's gotta be nuts."

"Really?" Erie said, letting his inflection ask the rest of the question. *If it's so nutty, why would your number one suspect do it?*

He saw in Huff's eyes that she heard the question. He also saw that she didn't have a good answer—and that it enraged her.

Erie didn't pat himself on the back for poking a hole in her theory. He needed all the theories he could get. If their trip out to the other hospital was a bust, he only had one other idea to fall back on, and he didn't like it.

But a bust it was. Erie and Huff went through the same routine with the nurses at Knox Memorial, with the same result. No bites, no scratches, too many questions. They escaped as quickly as they could.

"You ready for Spencer now?" Huff asked as they walked to the car.

Erie shook his head. "I'm ready for Hart Road."

"What's on Hart Road?"

"My place. I need to make some calls. And if we're gonna drive up to Spencer, I'll need to feed my cats."

"Cats?" The irritation in Huff's eyes seemed to give way to what could have been some small measure of respect. "Plural?"

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"Yeah."

"How many?"

"Three."

Huff waved a hand dismissively and looked away. "Is that all?"

" 'Is that all?' I've got friends who say it's three too many."

"They don't know what they're talking about. Wanna know how many cats I have?"

"Sure."

"Five."

Erie shrugged. "That's only two more than me."

"Yeah, but then there's the dogs, the rats, the pig, and the parrot on top of that."

"Geez. Do you work in a zoo or live in one?"

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard that one before," Huff said. But for a second there it almost looked like she was capable of smiling.

When they got to Erie's place, Goldie and Mae met them at the door. Huff was a lot friendlier meeting new pets than new people, and she bent down to introduce herself to the cats with ear scratches and tummy rubs.

"Where's number three?"

Erie pointed across the living room. His newest cat, Phoebe, peeked at them from around a corner, her yellow eyes wide and unblinking.

"A shy one, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't blame her. She's been through some rough stuff. She almost ended up an hors d'oeuvre at your zoo, as a matter of fact. Excuse me."

Erie walked into the kitchen and checked his answering machine. There was one new message. He pushed PLAY.

"Hi, this is Bob calling from 21st Century Travel Plus. I'm really sorry I missed you today, because I've got some great news. You've—"

Erie erased the message. He'd heard Bob's "great news" twenty times before. Apparently, Erie had been specially selected—by virtue of having his phone number dialed—to become a member of the 21st Century Travel Plus Luxury Living Timeshare Program. All he needed to do to activate his membership was begin handing over his life savings in simple monthly installments.

One of these days Erie was going to really put his detecting skills to the test and track Bob down. He hadn't made up his mind what he was going to do when he found him. He was still torn between a pie in the face and a kick in the pants.

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Huff stepped into the kitchen, and Erie asked her if she wanted any coffee or water or juice or candy bars before they headed out again. She looked so lost in thought for a moment Erie wasn't even sure she heard the question, but then her eyes refocused on him and she shook her head.

"So," she said, and Erie got the feeling she was as unsure what words would follow as he was. "You said you had some phone calls to make."

"Actually, the first one's yours. I think you should give the zoo a call. Maybe there's been some kind of development."

"Such as what?"

"A ransom demand, or maybe they found Maggie hiding up in a tree. I don't know. That's why I need you to call in."

"Okay," Huff said. "Makes sense."

Erie moved away from the phone, and Huff picked it up and dialed. He had the feeling she'd wanted to check in with the zoo anyway but she felt obligated to run everything he suggested through a B.S. X-ray.

Erie noted that she didn't call Reed or Overbeck. Instead, she chatted with someone she called "Dave." She asked if anything had happened since they'd left and how the remaining capuchins were acting. She also asked what Overbeck had been up to, and Erie noticed that she tried a little too hard to make the question sound like a casual aside. Then she gave "Dave" a gruff goodbye, hung up, and said, "Nothing. What next?"

Now I swallow my pride, Erie thought.

"One other call," he said, reaching out to take the phone. He dialed the number from memory.

"Lt. Zirkelbach, please," he told the dispatcher who picked up the call. She didn't recognize his voice, and he was thankful.

Erie's friend Bass kept telling him he'd had a "thing" about the River City Police Department ever since he'd applied for a private detective's license.

"It's like you're embarrassed every time you're around 'em," Bass would say.

"I am embarrassed."

"Well, get over it!"

But Erie couldn't. Whenever he took a case, he felt like a kid playing dress-up. He wasn't a cop anymore. Why was he trying to act like one? Who was he trying to fool?

"East Sector, Zirkelbach."

"Mike, it's Larry Erie."

This was the moment Erie dreaded. If he got through the first

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few seconds, he'd be okay He just needed Zirkelbach to say something other than "So how's River City's toughest gumshoe these days?" or "Hey, Rockford! How are the files comin'?"

"Larry! How ya' been?" Zirkelbach said.

Yet even in those words Erie thought he heard something. A snicker maybe. A roll of the eyes. Or maybe that was just Erie's "thing" about the RCPD playing tricks on him. He did his best to ignore it.

"Oh, you know. This and that. Raking leaves, watching too much TV. The usual old fart stuff."

"Sounds good to me. Two more years and I'll be out there rakin' leaves with ya. I can't wait."

"Yeah, it's the life all right," Erie said, because it was the kind of thing he was supposed to say, and he had other business to move along to. "So, Mike, I'm just looking into something for a friend. It's no big deal really. But I was wondering—did anything weird go down last night?"

"Weird? Like how do you mean?"

"You know. Out of the ordinary. Noteworthy. Something that would have people talking."

"Nope. Not that I heard."

"How about the other sectors? Same thing?"

"Yeah, same thing. Nothin' weird. Just the usual perps and pervs."

"Okay. One other thing. Do you know if that Mojo kid is still in town?"

"Oh, yeah. We ain't rid of him yet."

"He have any known hangouts?"

"Hold on. DeYoung's right here. I'll ask him."

Erie heard Zirkelbach's thick hand wrap around the receiver.

"Hey, DeYoung!" Zirkelbach called out, his booming voice only slightly muffled over the phone. "Where'd you buttonhole Birdboy last time?"

Erie couldn't hear the response, just Zirkelbach's "Uh-huh."

"Know where he lives?" Zirkelbach asked, his hand still smothering the mouthpiece. "Really? That figures. Larry Erie. I don't know. Yeah. Okay."

Zirkelbach brought the receiver back up to his mouth.

"He works in a coffee shop on Sherman. The Daily Grind. You know it?"

"I know it."

"No known place of residence. The landlords in town talk to

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each other, y'know. Last time we checked in on him he said he was living in a VW van."

"You're kidding."

"That's what DeYoung says. He says to say 'Hi,' by the way."

"Right back at him."

"So, Larry . . ."

Erie's shoulders tensed, his jaw clenched. Here it came.

"I gotta ask. You callin' up with questions about the East Sector and Dr. Dolittle and all . . . well, I can't help but put two and two and two together. There somethin' else goin' on out at the zoo we should know about?"

Erie eyed Huff. She eyed him back warily, obviously brimming over with questions and distrust.

"Like I said, I'm just looking into something for a friend."

Zirkelbach chuckled. A part of Erie wanted to chuckle right along with him. Another part wanted to ask him what was so damn funny.

"Okay, Larry," Zirkelbach said. "I hope you find whatever you're lookin' for."

"Me too. Thanks for the help, Mike."

Erie hung up. He wanted a minute to think, scroll back over the conversation, dissect it. But Huff didn't give him the chance.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Acquiring information."

Erie walked over to the refrigerator and pulled it open. The shelves inside were brimming with almost every condiment known to man, and almost nothing to put them on. After a little scrounging, Erie found a package of hot dogs buried beneath a loose pile of individually wrapped slices of cheese.

"You sure you don't want something to eat? It's almost one."

"I'll eat after we go to Spencer."

Erie sighed.

"Suit yourself. But it could be a while. It's a long drive, and we've got another stop to make before we hit the road."

Huff cursed so explosively Mae scrambled off the kitchen counter and darted out of the room. Erie put the hot dogs back in the fridge, his appetite suddenly gone.

"Let's just go," he said.

He tried to explain once they were in the car.

"Have you ever heard of Animal Freedom Now?"

"No." She drew the word out as she said it, the inflection meant to tell him, "Why should I have? I don't believe a word you say."

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"It's an animal rights group. Or at least that's what it's supposed to be. As far as we can tell, it's really just one guy."

"We?"

She'd caught him there. Not we. *They.*

"The police," Erie said. "Last March, somebody *liberated* a bunch of chickens from a farm outside town. There was a message left behind—a crackpot letter from Animal Freedom Now. It spooked certain people, and the case got a lot of attention."

"Then how come I never heard of it?"

"*Internal* attention. The RCPD, the county sheriff, and the state police were all in on the investigation. It got cracked on a lucky breakthough. A noise complaint."

"Let me guess. Crowing."

"Pecking and scratching, actually. The guy took more than fifty chickens, but he didn't know what to do with them. So he just kept them in his apartment. By the time the police showed up, the place was covered wall to wall in—"

"I work with animals. I know."

"Yeah. Well, all the chickens were recovered, and nobody wanted to give this Animal Freedom kid any publicity because that's all he was really after in the first place. He calls himself Major Mojo, and he figured he needed some ink to attract recruits. I think he was actually looking forward to a trial. So certain interested parties talked the farmer into dropping charges, and—"

"And the whole thing was kept quiet."

It wasn't just a statement of fact. It was some kind of accusation. Erie couldn't quite figure out what he was being accused of.

"That's right," he said. "Now every time anybody so much as crank calls a farmer, an officer has a few words with Major Mojo. I don't think he's been up to much since then beyond handing out flyers in front of McDonald's, but who knows? Maybe he thought up another way to make a name for himself."

"You said you think this kid works alone?"

Erie nodded.

Huff shook her head.

"There's no way in hell anybody could grab Maggie without help, not with seven other capuchins there too," she said. "No way."

"Maybe there's a Sgt. Mojo now too."

Erie knew it was a lame joke, but it was the only response he had in him. Because Huff was right. And if Major Mojo turned out to be a wild-goose chase, Erie was going to have a mutiny on his hands.

The Daily Grind was one block from the Midwest's most awk-

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wardly named campus: Indiana University–Purdue University River City. The locals shortened that to IUPURC, but even that was a mouthful.

Before they even parked, Erie knew he'd find Major Mojo in the coffee shop. The VW van out front told him that. Erie stopped to get a better look at the van before they went inside. It was covered with flaking orange paint and enough bumper stickers to wallpaper a small house. I DON'T EAT MY FRIENDS, one of the stickers read. Another was a picture of a little cartoon boy relieving himself on a pair of golden arches.

Erie tried to move quickly, glancing down to check all the door handles as he circled the van. They looked grimy, but free of blood. He'd told Huff to wait on the curb, but she stayed a step behind him, peering in through the windows.

"You're being conspicuous," he said under his breath.

"Oh really?"

One of the windows was cranked down a few inches, and Huff pushed her nose up against it and gave the air inside a long whiff.

"Oh man," she said, grimacing.

"What?" Erie's heart beat a little faster. "Does it smell like Maggie?"

"No. It smells like doobie. A lotta doobie."

Erie almost asked her how she knew what "doobie" smelled like, but he thought better of it.

"Come on," he said instead. "Let's go inside before—"

"How can I help you today, Officers?"

When Erie turned toward the voice, he found himself facing Fidel Castro circa 1959. He was a young man wearing combat fatigues, big black boots, and a thick beard that threatened to grow over his smiling face like kudzu.

"Do you want a signed confession? Or were you hoping to beat it out of me?" Major Mojo asked.

"We're not cops," Erie said, but Huff was already talking over his words, drowning them out.

"What do you have to confess?"

Major Mojo shrugged happily. "What you got? It don't matter. You're gonna hassle me anyway, right?"

"We're not cops," Erie repeated.

Major Mojo winked at him. "Hey, I understand. It's Halloween, right? You wanna say you're not cops, that's fine by me. So what are you then? Tourists?"

"Look, we're just—"

"Where were you last night?" Huff asked.

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Erie moaned and rolled his eyes. If he ever took another case—if—he would have an unbreakable rule: Clients never, ever take part in an investigation.

"I was just hangin' with some friends, y'know—startin' a bonfire with Old Glory, plottin' acts of sedition. The usual," Major Mojo said.

He thought they were cops, and he loved it. He was dressed like Fidel Castro, but Erie could see who he really wanted to be: Abbie Hoffman.

That was the angle Erie had to play. The kid's self-image. He was the heroic freedom fighter, they were stooges of The Man. All right. Erie would make him prove it. He opened his mouth . . . and Huff beat him again.

"You say you like animals?" she asked.

Major Mojo nodded. "Love 'em all, big and small."

"And you want to help them?"

"That's what I'm all about."

"Then here's your big chance."

She stepped toward him quickly, moving until she was almost standing on his toes, and for the first time Erie could see the fear behind Major Mojo's bluster. His smile drooped, he took a step backwards, his hand came up as if to ward off a blow.

"There's an animal out there somewhere," Huff said, her voice dropping low but the intensity ratcheted up high. "She's scared, alone. Maybe hurt, maybe dying. And every second I waste here on your B.S. is a second I'm not out looking for her. So stop playing games and answer me *right now.* Where were you last night?"

Major Mojo looked slightly dazed, but Erie could tell it wasn't just that he was overwhelmed by Huff—or the effects of too much "doobie." He was thinking. The pause that followed was over so quickly most people wouldn't even notice it. But a cop would.

"I worked here till eight, then I went to my girlfriend's place," Major Mojo said. "We watched a movie and went to bed. That's it. That's all. Really."

"I believe him," Huff announced without hesitating. "Let's go." Then she walked away, heading for Erie's car up the block.

Erie watched her go in stunned silence. So much for the quiet investigation Reed had asked for. Another outburst like that and they'd wind up on the evening news.

When Erie turned to look at Major Mojo again, he saw that the distant, confused look was still on the young man's face. There was no trace of the grin with which he'd greeted them.

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Erie waited for him to ask "What's she talking about?" or "Where are you people from?" But he didn't. Which meant Erie had more questions for him.

Now wasn't the time and place though. Huff had seen to that. Their conversation had turned a few heads on the sidewalk, and everyone inside the coffee shop was staring at them. It was time to go.

"Thanks," Erie said before shuffling reluctantly after Huff.

She was already in the passenger seat when Erie got to his car, her seatbelt buckled. She was ready to travel. Erie wasn't.

"Look," he said as he slid in behind the steering wheel.

"Just drive." Huff's words were clipped and tight, as if she had to fight to keep them from spiraling up into a scream.

"Look," Erie said again. "I think that kid knows something."

"Oh, please. Just cuz he's a little fringy doesn't make him the bad guy."

"It's not just that. I've got a feeling—"

"You've got a feeling? I've had a feeling from the very beginning! But no. We had to—"

Erie shook his head. "I know what you're thinking and it just doesn't hold together. Spencer's a waste of time."

Erie saw the spark in her eyes before the explosion came. He'd given her what she'd been waiting for. A trigger. An excuse to blow up. And she did it.

She started with some generic cursing, then grew more specific, telling Erie exactly what he was and what he could go do to himself. Then she told him why.

He wasn't even trying to find Maggie, she told him. He was just trying to sweep her under the rug.

Erie hated losing his temper, hated himself on those rare occasions when he raised his voice. But he'd heard enough.

"Look, lady, I don't know anything about your petty squabbles at the zoo. But I do know they've got you so twisted around you can't see facts when they're staring you in the face. Whoever stole Maggie, they're amateurs, and that means odds are they're right here in town."

"What facts am I not facing, Erie? Cuz you're right—I don't see 'em. All I see is a detective who's bending over backwards not to follow up his best lead."

"You want to see my best lead? Here's my best lead. In fact, it's the only damn evidence I've got."

Erie pulled out his wallet and showed her the piece of fabric he'd tucked away there earlier.

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"I found this in the monkey habitat this morning. Do you know what it is?"

Huff gave her shoulders an angry, jerking shrug. "Some lint you just pulled out of your pocket?"

"I think it's a piece of a blanket. Do you get what that means? These guys didn't bring a net or tranquilizer darts or whatever. They showed up to catch a monkey with a *blanket*. Whoever they are, they're not just amateurs—they're idiots."

"Or maybe that's what it's supposed to look like."

"What? A trick?"

"Sure."

"Well, if that's what it was, they took it pretty far. The zoo's got a back entrance, right? It must. There's no way you guys bring animals in and out through the front gate."

"Yeah. So?"

"So if these guys were pros, if they had help, why would they go to all the trouble of getting an angry monkey out through those turnstiles?"

"We don't know they did."

"The blood—"

"That doesn't prove a thing. It could have been planted."

Erie almost fired off a salvo about her pig-headed stubbornness, but he stopped himself. She was right. The blood, the fuzz, everything he'd seen at the zoo—it could be an elaborate ruse.

It could be . . . but it wasn't. That's what his gut told him. He'd spent three decades staring people in the eye while they lied to him. He'd listened to a thousand bogus accusations and ten thousand phony alibis. People had tried to con him from the day he put on his uniform to the day he handed in his badge. And this didn't feel like a con. It felt like a stupid, stupid joke.

But why should he trust his instincts? They can trick you too. Huff was proof of that. She was jabbering away at him, throwing around the words "Overbeck" and "Eyler," getting angrier as it grew more obvious that Erie was only half listening.

At least her instincts gave her ready-made bad guys. Erie's left him with a whole city of suspects. You never heard a cop say "Somebody's pulled a dumb-ass prank on the East Side—round up the usual suspects."

Wait.

Erie had heard cops say that. There'd even been a few times he'd said it himself.

"Of course," he mumbled, shaking his head, wondering why he hadn't thought of it before.

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Then again, he couldn't judge himself too harshly. He might have made the connection hours ago if he'd been working alone.

"Let me guess," Huff said. "You've got just *one more place* we've got to check before we go to Spencer."

"Yes," Erie said.

Huff coughed out a bitter, scoffing laugh. "Erie, you have truly lost your mind if you think I'm gonna buy whatever load of crap you're about to unload."

Her words, her scorn, they didn't bother Erie at all, and he spoke with such renewed confidence Huff actually listened.

"This morning Reed said your night watchman recently chased off some college kids who'd been skinny-dipping somewhere in the zoo."

"Yeah. So?"

"He didn't catch them?"

"No, they got away."

"So how did he know they were college kids?"

"He said they were frat boys and their girlfriends."

"But how did he know they were frat boys?"

"One of them had a sweatshirt with, you know, Greek letters."

Erie shook his head. "IUPURC doesn't have any fraternities."

A scowl twisted Huff's face, but it was different than the scowls Erie had seen there already. It wasn't bitter or angry. Just confused.

"Let me show you something," Erie said.

He started the car. Less than two minutes later, he was shutting it off again. They were on a quiet side street just a few blocks from the coffee shop. One side of the street was lined with the kind of low-rent apartment complexes favored by college kids living off campus. Facing them was a row of houses that, judging by the gleaming Jeeps and SUVs parked out front, catered to students with a little more money. Over the doorway to one of the homes hung three twinkling horseshoes—the Greek letter omega done up in white Christmas lights.

"They call themselves The Omega Men," Erie said. "Or at least they did last I heard. They've lived in that house for more than twenty years. Not the same ones, of course. Different guys coming and going. Just like a frat, which is exactly what they'd be if the school were a little bigger and they could get picked up as a chapter of one of the national fraternities."

Spider-Man strolled by the car, and both Erie and Huff did a double take. Walking with him were a hobbit and an adolescent girl who was either dressed as a streetwalker or Britney Spears.

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They were chattering loudly and swinging plastic buckets shaped like pumpkins.

"They're getting an early start."

"Erie, why are we here?"

It wasn't just another jab. She was actually prepared to listen—if he said the right things.

Erie began counting off with his fingers.

"One, if your night watchman's right, they've probably been in the zoo before. That explains how they knew their way around in there at night. Two, there's a twenty-four-hour student clinic on campus, which is why whoever got hurt wouldn't have gone to a hospital. Three, these guys have a reputation for crazy stunts and wild parties. The RCPD has to send a car out here at least once a month, and I could tell you stories about homecoming that would curl your hair. And four, there's what they call their headquarters there."

"What's that?"

"Animal House."

Huff stared at the house for a moment, then looked back at Erie.

"Okay," she said, and from the way she said it Erie could tell she believed him. Which wasn't the same thing as believing he was right. She just believed he wasn't lying. "If Maggie's not in there, we go to Spencer, right?"

"You'll get no argument from me. If they don't have her, I'm just your chauffeur from here on in, because I'll be all out of ideas."

As they marched up the walk to the front door, they passed Spidey and his friends, who were grumbling about the "candy" they'd just been given: fried eggs.

"Funny guys," Huff said, not amused.

"Unzip the jacket," Erie told her.

They were almost to the porch.

"What? Why?"

"I want to see what they think of your costume. Now *please* let me do the talking this time."

He reached out and rang the bell, and while he and Huff waited for someone to answer, Erie put on his own costume. It was nothing more than a mask, one he carried with him at all times, buried deep. His cop face. Stern, stiff, dry, unforgiving.

When a brawny Omega Man came to the door with a pan of fried eggs in one hand and a spatula in the other, Erie got the reaction he was looking for. First a bad boy grin, the kid assuming they were neighborhood parents furious about the "treats" he was giving out. Then a closer look at Erie's face and Huff's zoo

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uniform, and the grin lost its balance, tipping over into a lopsided grimace.

The kid had something to hide, Erie was sure of that. But finding out if that something included a stolen monkey could be tricky. He and Huff had no legal authority to conduct a search. If the wannabe frat boy wanted to stonewall them, he could. Erie hoped he'd panic.

But he didn't. The kid recovered quickly. His grin righted itself, and he snaked a foot around the door and pulled it tight to his side, blocking their view into the house.

"Aren't you two a little old to be trick-or-treating?" the kid asked.

"You know why we're here," Erie said.

"You came for the Grand Slam breakfast?"

"You boys are in a lot of trouble."

"What? Because of this?" The kid waved the pan in their direction. "Hey, eggs are delicious *and* nutritious. A hell of a lot more healthy than candy bars. You ought to be thanking us."

He was smooth, Erie had to give him that. A political science major probably. Pre-law. He had the bland, doughy good looks of a state politician. He'd go far, if Huff didn't kill him first. The air around them was practically crackling with her seething rage.

"We don't want to call the police," Erie said. "But we will if we have to. It'll be a lot better for everybody if it doesn't come to that."

The kid furrowed his brow in mock confusion and laughed. "Man, what are you smoking? You are making no sense."

"If you deal with us, this'll all be over in minutes. But the cops . . ." Erie shook his head and shrugged. "We'll have to press charges. We won't have a choice."

"Okay, man," the kid said, still forcing out a string of unconvincing chuckles. "Whatever."

Erie saw what was coming next. He could read it in the college boy's eyes. Close the door. Get rid of the evidence. Get rid of it fast and without pity.

"Happy Halloween," the kid said as he started to push the door shut.

It had been a long, long time since Erie had stuck his foot in a closing door. You have to do it just right or you end up with a shattered ankle or crushed toes or a thigh the color of grape jelly. Fortunately, with his hands full, the kid couldn't slam the door hard, and Erie's foot stayed on the end of his leg.

"Don't be stupid," Erie said.

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He was pressed up against the door, bringing his face just inches from the kid's.

"Back off, man! Back off or I'm calling the cops!"

"Do it," Erie bluffed. "Please."

"Get out of here!"

The kid poked at him with the spatula, wiping dried bits of egg on his face. The last drop of patience in Erie's body evaporated.

"Hey!" someone shouted.

"Stop him!"

It took both Erie and the kid a moment to realize all the shouting wasn't about them. Something else was going on inside the house, something involving yelling and running and scuffling and finally a series of piercing, inhuman shrieks. The kid looked over his shoulder to see what he could see. Erie looked over his own shoulder to see if Huff was still there.

She was.

"Go!" she said.

Erie went, giving the door a hard shove just as the kid turned back toward him again. The edge caught him across the face, flattening his nose, and he and his frying pan went down in a messy, clattering pile. Erie stepped over him, pushing words like *trespassing* and *assault* out of his mind as best he could as he headed for the stairs. The screams seemed to be coming from the second floor. Huff pushed past him, taking three steps at a time.

A guy dressed as Tarzan met them at the top of the stairs. He actually looked relieved to see them.

"You from the zoo?"

"Yes," Huff said.

"Some guy got in the house and now he's in my room with the monkey and I think it's killing him!"

"Which room?" Huff asked, but a fresh round of screams told her exactly where to go.

She and Erie pushed past more young men in the hallway, most in costume. Erie noticed that one of them, a hulking redhead dressed as Frankenstein's monster, had real stitches over his forehead and across his chin. Fresh ones. Erie glanced down at the young man's feet. Size twelve, at least. The shrieks were coming from a closed door just beyond him.

"Hey," the redhead said as Huff and Erie approached, "I don't think you wanna go in there."

Huff stepped around him and opened the door. The Omega Men ran for cover.

Huff didn't open the door all the way, but it was enough. A

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familiar odor assaulted Erie's nostrils, and a disgusted, involuntary "Ewwww" slipped past his lips. His eyes watering, he peered over Huff's shoulder, looking for the source of the smell in the room beyond.

It was a bedroom, and it looked as if it had been picked up by a giant, shaken like a snow globe, and put back in place upside down. Lamps and chairs had been overturned, posters torn off the walls, beer and wine bottles shattered, clothes and magazines and notebooks strewn about the floor, brown clumps splattered here and there over just about everything.

A tattered blanket lay crumpled in a corner next to a length of stained rope. Hunched nearby was a panting, wild-eyed monkey.

"Wraaa!" Maggie yelled as she scrambled on top of a stereo speaker, knocking over the bong that had been perched there. "Wraaa!"

"Is somebody there?" asked a trembly, muffled voice. "You gotta help me. Please. I'm trapped."

"Where are you?" Erie asked.

"Down here. In the corner."

Protruding from under one of the beds was a pair of combat boots and fatigue-covered ankles.

"Major Mojo?"

There was a pause, then a pitiful, "Yes?"

Erie wasn't sure what would happen next. Would they have to get tranquilizer darts from the zoo? Chase Maggie around with a blanket? Given the wounds he'd seen on Frankenstein, he wasn't anxious to play monkey in the middle himself.

Huff answered his question by simply stepping into the room and saying, "Hi, sweetie."

Maggie jumped off the speaker and charged at them. Erie brought up his hands, sure that within seconds he was going to be pulling a clawing, screaming monkey off his face.

Instead, he watched as Maggie leapt onto Huff, climbed into her arms, and huddled there.

"It's okay, baby," Huff said, her voice taking on a soothing, nurturing quality Erie hadn't heard all day. "Calm down. Everything's fine."

Maggie wrapped her long arms around Huff's neck, looking suddenly like a very skinny, very fuzzy child.

"You two get out," Huff said, still using the low, sing-songy tone even though she was talking to Erie and Major Mojo. "I need a few minutes to make sure she's totally calm before I try to move her.

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And keep those morons out of the hallway. I don't want them scaring her on the way out."

Erie walked over and nudged the bottom of Major Mojo's boot with his foot.

"Come on. Let's go."

The young activist slithered backwards out of his hiding place and rolled over to look up at Erie, revealing a large purple-blue bruise across the left side of his face. He looked a little embarrassed to be seen cowering under a bed, but by the time he and Erie were out in the hallway he'd managed to straighten up his spine and put a haughty gleam in his eyes.

"You want to tell me what you were trying to do in there?" Erie asked him.

"No."

Frankenstein's monster poked his head out a nearby doorway. "So you're taking it back to the zoo?"

Erie nodded. "That's right."

"Thank God."

The Omega Men began stepping out into the hallway again, looking both sheepish and relieved. When they saw Major Mojo, though, their expressions turned sour.

"Okay, so you're from the zoo," one of them said to Erie. "But what the hell is he doing here?"

"Good question." Erie turned to Major Mojo. "Why don't you answer that for us while I escort you out of the house."

Major Mojo got it right away. He'd just lost a fight with an eight-pound monkey. He wouldn't do any better against a dozen two-hundred-pound college students.

"Yeah, sure, fine," he said.

"The rest of you follow us. We need the hallway clear if we're going to get your other guest out of here." Erie held out his hand toward the stairs. "All right, Major. Walk and talk."

That's just what he did.

"I've got my sources," Major Mojo said, sounding officious, as if the uniform he had on was more than a costume. "Everybody around here knows I'm Mr. Help-the-Animals. So I had three different people come into the Grind today to tell me these guys had a stolen monkey. So I planned an action for tonight. But then—"

"An *action?*"

"Yeah. An operation."

"Oh, right," Erie said. "You mean you were going to steal the monkey back yourself."

"Liberate, man. I was gonna *liberate* the monkey. Later tonight.

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But then you guys showed up and, you know, I had to speed things up."

"Why not just help us?"

"I thought about it. But hey, zoos are prisons, man. And this one we've got here is like . . . like . . . What's a really bad prison?"

"Alcatraz?"

"Yeah. Like Alcatraz. It's the worst."

"So what were you going to do with Maggie?"

"With who?"

"Maggie. The monkey."

"It's a she? Wow." He rubbed the side of his face ruefully. "Well, I hadn't planned things out that far. I thought I'd just liberate her and then take it from there."

"Only she didn't want to be liberated."

"No way, man. She wanted to take my damn head off."

They were outside now, on the back porch.

"All right," Erie said. "I guess that's that."

"So I'm free to go?"

Erie nodded. "Consider yourself liberated."

"Oh. Okay."

Major Mojo walked away slowly. He seemed disappointed to be getting off so easy. Some police brutality might have cheered him up, but Erie didn't feel like obliging.

The gaggle of Omega Men had dutifully followed Erie and Major Mojo to the back of the house. They peeked at Erie through the screen door, their anxious expressions asking *What about us?*

"Okay, guys," Erie said to them as he stepped back inside. "If you want this story to have a happy ending for yourselves, you're going to tell me everything."

There wasn't much to tell, really. The Omega Men were having a Halloween party that night, and they wanted to make it "something special." After all, as residents of Animal House, they had a reputation to live up to. They already knew how easy it was to break into the zoo, so why not borrow one of the animals—just for Halloween? They settled on a monkey because "monkeys are funny."

"When you see 'em on TV they're just like little people. You know, they're just goofy and cute," said the kid Erie had dealt with downstairs, who was pressing a red-stained paper towel to his nose. "But they're not."

Frankenstein's monster pointed at his stitches. "That one we caught was one of the smallest ones in there, and she still managed to do this to me."

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An Omega Man dressed as Abe Lincoln showed Erie a black eye. "I got this from her tail."

"Yeah," Tarzan said. "And there was this big one that got hold of my hair—"

There were footsteps on the stairs, and the room fell silent.

"You guys stay here," Erie said. He pushed through the crowd in the kitchen to the foyer. Huff was waiting for him with Maggie still snuggled in her arms.

"Let's go," Huff said.

Erie walked her to the car, both of them trying to move fast but not too fast. Fortunately, the block was temporarily free of costumed kids, and they managed to get to Erie's Corolla without being spotted.

Once Huff and Maggie were in the car, Erie started around for the driver's side. But he stopped himself as he rounded the trunk. There was one more bit of business to attend to. He went back to Animal House.

It was like trick-or-treating in reverse. The Omega Men were inside, all of them done up in ridiculous costumes, peering at the stranger outside their door who had the power to hand them something nice or something nasty.

Erie knew they had nothing to be nervous about. Reed would want everything kept quiet. Which meant no criminal charges.

Which meant they would get away with it.

Erie could tell them that, give them a little speech about how they'd be fine as long as they kept their mouths shut. He pictured their relieved smiles, heard how they'd tell the story around the keg that night, and he said to himself, *No.* He took a moment to think up the most bone-chilling, spine-tingling, hair-raising words he could.

"You'll be hearing from our attorneys," he said. And he left.

"What was that all about?" Huff asked him when he slid into the driver's seat.

Erie told her, and she laughed in a way that said she'd laugh a lot harder if she didn't have a stressed-out monkey in her arms.

"To the zoo?" Erie asked.

She nodded. "To the zoo."

On the way, he filled her in on Major Mojo and the Omega Men. She shook her head once or twice, frowned a bit, but now that Maggie was in her arms she seemed almost unflappably relaxed.

"You two seem close," Erie said when he'd wrapped up his report.

Huff grinned. "Oh yeah. When she was barely a year old, she

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caught pneumonia. Almost died. I nursed her back to health by hand. She pretty much lived with me for three months. Monkeys don't forget something like that."

"Neither do people."

Huff stared at Erie a moment, her expression turning quizzical. "Let me ask you something," she said. "Back at your house, you made a crack about one of your cats. What did that mean?"

"What crack?"

"Something about one of them almost ending up an hors d'oeuvre at the zoo."

"Oh. She was one of the animals I rescued," Erie explained. Huff didn't nod or say "I see" or make any indication she knew what the hell he was talking about. "From the people who were selling roadkill to the zoo." The blank look stayed on her face. "The ones who were stealing people's pets."

"Stealing people's pets?" Huff's face twisted in a way that said she was fighting to hold back a string of curses. "You'd better tell it from the beginning," she said.

So he did. As he told Huff the story, her expression changed from barely controlled rage to horror and finally, as he described the ultimatum he'd given Reed, embarrassment.

"You didn't know any of this?" he asked when he was done.

"Just bits and pieces. I knew Overbeck was buying roadkill on the sly. And I heard that got us into some kind of hot water, and a private detective got us out of it."

"What?"

Erie finally understood Huff's hostility. As far as she'd known, he was just a cheap fixer, someone who hushed up scandals for a living.

"I'm really sorry," Huff said, reading his mind. "I know I've been a real bitch today."

Erie didn't contradict her.

"I thought you were someone else, you know what I mean?" Huff continued. "I was so convinced you were hooked in with . . . I don't know . . . something skanky that I . . . well, I made up an excuse to tag along."

"Wait a second. Reed didn't tell you to come with me?"

Huff shook her head, looking chagrined. "It was my idea. I wanted to keep an eye on you. See if you were really going to look for Maggie or just jerk me around."

"Geez," Erie sighed. "Well, you got me, I'll give you that. I didn't see that one coming."

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"Really, I'm sorry. If it hadn't been for the rumors I'd heard, I would've known you were a good guy."

"Oh yeah? How?"

"Well, come on. Three cats? You had to be okay."

Huff was smiling at him again. And Maggie was looking at him too, the look on her small, round face tentative but not fearful.

It had been a very strange, distressing day, but Erie just didn't have any talent for holding grudges. He smiled back.

By the time he dropped Huff off at the zoo's rear entrance, she'd promised to make it all up to him by taking him out for dinner sometime. He wasn't sure how he felt about that—he could tell she was a lady with edges even on a good day—but he said yes all the same. It seemed like the safest thing to do.

It was growing dusky dark by the time Erie left the zoo, and he quickly realized two things: He hadn't eaten a thing since that morning's Snickers, and he'd earned a better dinner than cheese slices and hot dogs. So he stopped off for a pizza and a bottle of wine on the way home.

He was feeling pretty good as he turned onto Hart Road. His old instincts had come through for him. The badge was gone, but the cop remained.

The satisfied look on his face didn't last long though. Up ahead, long strands of white waved like ghostly tentacles from the branches of his elm trees.

His house had been egged too.

Note to Our Readers:

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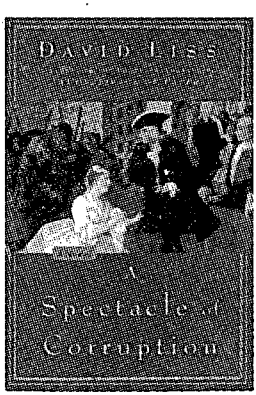
BOOKED & PRINTED

LENNY PICKER

To paraphrase the writer T. E. D. Klein, there is something inherently comforting about a well-crafted historical mystery. It conjures up visions of a safely distant past, whether it is a few decades ago or a few centuries ago, and creates a remove that insulates the reader to a certain extent from present-day fears and anxieties, even when the author focuses on plots that have some resonance for the contemporary audience. In some cases, the characters are anxious about events whose outcome is now well known, allowing the reader a sense of omniscience. And in the hands of a skilled writer, the reader gets a thorough but comprehensible tutorial on a different time and place, concealed within the easily digestible exterior of a classic fair-play puzzle plot.

The current landscape of authors laboring in this growing mystery sub-genre is impressive, with outstanding craftsmen such as Steven Saylor, whose Roma Sub Rosa series featuring Gordianus the Finder brings alive the last days of the Roman Republic in a manner evocative of Robert Graves's Claudius novels. Another fine writer is Charles Todd, whose Inspector Ian Rutledge carries the psychic wounds of World War I trench warfare with him as he returns to a post-war England, aided by perhaps the most unusual Watsonian sounding board yet devised. David Liss, David Dickinson, Jane Jakeman, and Laurie R. King have all recently produced quality historicals that merit both a wider audience and further comment.



David Liss's impressive debut, *A Conspiracy of Paper*, an Edgar Award–winner for Best First Novel, introduced readers to Benjamin Weaver, a Jewish boxer turned sleuth, who found himself embroiled in the intrigues surrounding the collapse of the South Sea Bubble in early eighteenth-century England, precipitating England's first stock market crash. After last year's compelling detour into commercial espionage in *The Coffee Trader*, Liss returns to Weaver in A SPECTACLE OF CORRUPTION (Random House $24.95), set two years after the end of *A Conspiracy of Paper*. This time, Weaver's

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search for the truth is intensely personal, as an unknown adversary has not only framed him for the murder of a dockworker and labor leader, but has systematically eliminated anyone who could help prove Weaver's innocence. Weaver manages to avoid the gallows by a daring and dramatic escape from Newgate prison. Then to clear his name, he takes on the persona of a wealthy coffee merchant, newly arrived from the West Indies, and moves seamlessly between "polite society" and the underclasses. At the same time, the escaped convict becomes a political football, used for propaganda purposes by the rival factions vying for power in the upcoming Parliamentary elections, viewed by many as a referendum on the reign of George I. Weaver's efforts are further complicated by his continued obsession with his love interest, Miriam, now converted to Christianity and married to Griffin Melbury, a prominent Tory at Westminster. Liss's scholarship is unobtrusive but impressive. His depiction of London's mean streets is reminiscent of Dickens, and his protagonist's status as an outsider in English society provides a sharp lens on the period's class and religious prejudices. Liss also manages to make Weaver a plausible detective for his own time, avoiding anachronistic attitudes and methods that often mar otherwise laudable period whodunits.

Turn of the century London is the setting for David Dickinson's third Lord Francis Powerscourt novel, DEATH OF AN OLD MASTER (Carroll & Graf, $24). A discreet investigator, Powerscourt delves into the art world when a relative, an art critic, is murdered and his papers are stolen. To get to the heart of the crime, Powerscourt, with the aid of his wife, tracks a cleverly organized gang of art forgers who have systematically attempted to substitute fakes for originals by such artists as Raphael, Gainsborough, and Reynolds. Dickinson's latest effort only confirms the talents his earlier books displayed, with an original plot and fully fleshed and plausible main characters, as well as many believable secondary figures. Moreover, these living and breathing creations pursue an intriguing mystery, which is fairly and logically resolved in a surprising way at the suspenseful trial of the murder suspect.

Jane Jakeman also takes up an artistic motif and Edwardian time period in her stand-alone novel IN THE KINGDOM OF MISTS (Berkley, $23.95), but she has set herself a different challenge by using a series of brutal murders reminiscent of Jack the Ripper as her central plot point. Instead of a whodunit, Jakeman offers parallel narratives, which give perspectives on the investigation from the killer and from her detective, Scotland Yard Inspector Will Garrety. Both the quarry and his tracker cross paths with

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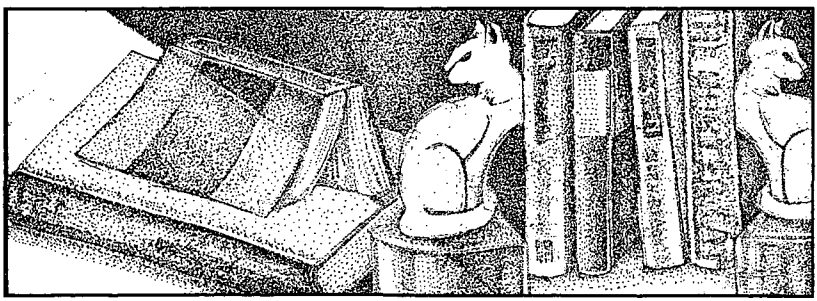
the Impressionist painter Claude Monet, who is working on creating images of the Thames just as the mutilated corpses of women turn up on its banks. The domestic consequences of the ongoing and bloody Boer War are convincingly rendered, and the use of Impressionism as a contrast to the mundane, gritty slog of typical police work is a subtle touch. The battles Garrety must wage with his superiors to pursue the truth nicely test his integrity and resolve; in Garrety, Jakeman has managed to offer a humanized and sympathetic variation on a stock figure.

Laurie R. King's THE GAME again focuses on the exploits of Mary Russell, the companion (and by now wife) she created for the legendary Sherlock Holmes—despite Doyle's original characterization of the Master as being close to misogynistic. A reader's initial disbelief that Holmes in his latter years would choose to marry is overcome by the ingenuity of King's creation—an intelligent, independent, resourceful woman of action, who at times comes across as almost too capable, such as when she masters the sport of pig-sticking. Russell and Holmes's latest caper takes them to India in search of Kimball O'Hara, who inspired Rudyard Kipling to create his legendary hero Kim, in an effort to ascertain whether O'Hara has shifted alliances in the "Great Game" of espionage and counter-espionage still rampant in the waning days of the British Empire. Despite a curious choice not to address one of the burning mysteries animating the quest, *The Game* is still a fast-paced, entertaining romp that simultaneously thrills and enlightens, though King is not Liss's equal at effortlessly interweaving the relevant history.



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A Confession of Innocence

ROBERT GRAY

As Kate and I settle into posh leather armchairs in a crowded lounge of the downtown Chicago hotel, we find it difficult to speak at first. Nearly thirty years have passed since we last saw one another, and now far too many shrill, well-dressed men and women engulf us. Our table is close to the bar, putting us in harm's way as people rudely wedge through to order drinks, then carry their sloshing glasses away above our heads.

Three different conventions are being held at the same time in the hotel—a regional meeting of Illinois realtors, some kind of international bank conference, and perhaps last as well as least, the Midwest Grocers' Association's annual meeting, a three-day jamboree for mid-to-upper-level management personnel in the retail food industry. It is this last event that has drawn Kate and me back together again after all these years.

The distractions are just a convenient excuse for our reticence. We both know the real reason why it is so hard to begin. There is only one topic of conversation possible, and neither of us wants to broach it.

Thirty years ago, we killed a man.

Kate and I probably should have crossed paths long before today. We've been going to these grocery industry sideshows for years. I might have expected that eventually we would be thrown together again, but I was still absolutely unprepared for it this morning, maybe because I was having such a cosmically lousy day when she suddenly appeared from nowhere, from the past, a magic act.

I was leading a seminar on employee self-motivation and it was a complete washout. At the end of my presentation, I looked out at the sea of blank faces and knew that nothing I'd said had

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registered. They were watching the clock, shuffling papers, stuffing briefcases, or intently studying the blue paisley carpet in the hotel's cavernous Birchwood Room. They had been as listless as I was throughout the seminar, but now they were restless, ready to bolt for their next seminar as soon as I dismissed them. A few brave souls had already headed for the door. I couldn't blame them.

"Any questions?" I asked, almost ceremonially, not expecting a response. Audiences travel in packs, like wolves, and hunt the same way. Their silence now was predatory. I waited for a question anyway, out of misplaced pride mostly. We were scheduled to go another five minutes and I had to earn my fee. Besides, I knew there would be a question if I held out long enough. It was a contest I'd won many times before—like Davy Crockett staring down a bear—by toughing out that aching minute or two before the first hand went up. It was always, and painfully, the same, even at a good event.

A plan we'd hatched and executed when we were old enough to know better, but too young to understand the consequences.

"Guess I answered all your questions in my talk," I challenged, smiling weakly. It was a lame joke, as desperate as anything I'd tried all morning. A few people politely chuckled, bless them.

"Anyone?" A hand suddenly flashed—a fat man, third row left, swaddled in a dark blue suit. He stared hard at me. I'd been aware of his scowl throughout my talk. "Yes, sir."

"Your book's title, *Work for Yourself* . . ."

"Working for Your Self," I corrected, stressing the separation of the final two words.

"Right, whatever. Well, I've been in the grocery business for thirty-seven years, and it seems to me that most of what you said, if that's what your book's about, is just plain common sense mixed up with some funny ideas about how workers should treat their bosses. Ain't it a little naive to think that this message works for bosses and workers both?"

I shook my head as I walked toward him down the center aisle; it's better to physically confront these challengers. Never let them think you're scared. "Not at all; I agree that I wrote this book with workers in mind because most management books I've read, and I've read them all, come at the issues only from an employer's perspective. I wanted to write for both, a book that workers could read to understand how to survive in today's climate, and man-

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agers could read to get a better understanding of what sort of workers they're supervising these days."

"But all this 'self' stuff," he said, clearly unconvinced. "Seems like the problem now is too much 'self' and not enough worrying about the other guy in the world. Whatever happened to being a team player, to loyalty, to gratitude for a place to work?"

"As I said earlier, it's been obvious for a long time now, what with the insecurities caused by downsizing in all business arenas, that workers can no longer rely upon one company to see them through their working lives. Each worker has to become a self-contained company of one, jobbing him or herself out to an employer in a mutually beneficial arrangement. This means that workers must serve as their own motivators, union stewards, and career planners. If they do that well, management's job, your job, is actually made easier because you're meeting these employees on equal terms and negotiating a task and a workplace environment that is humane and productive and, we hope, profitable for all concerned. It's about bringing ethics to the workplace as a day-to-day way of life. We shouldn't have to think about what the right thing to do is. We shouldn't have to constantly worry about who's getting the best of whom. Most people spend far more time with their bosses than with their spouses, and the number of bad workplace relationships is astounding, yet I've never heard of a boss and employee going to a job counselor the way a couple might go to a marriage counselor. Maybe they should."

"Sounds like selfish more than self," said the fat man. He muttered something under his breath to the guy seated to his right, who laughed, bowing his head and covering his mouth with one hand.

I waited a couple of seconds, letting the silence build. I just wasn't sure I had the game today to take this guy on. He wanted to nail me. He wanted a show, a big finish he could brag about over drinks tonight. He held my stare before finally speaking again. "You're saying that I should negotiate individual terms with my two hundred–plus cashiers spread over fifteen stores? And then my stockers, and then my bag boys, and then my meat cutters and produce clerks? One by one? Don't make sense in the real world."

"Since when did you operate in the real world, Lenny?" A woman's voice, slightly hoarse and aggressive, came from a few rows back, like cavalry riding over the crest of a hill to rescue a wagon train. When I glanced up I couldn't tell which of three middle-aged women seated together had spoken. They looked like a team, each wearing a dark-colored blazer and matching

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skirt over a brightly colored blouse—yellow, pale blue, green.

Several people laughed. The woman spoke again. "Lenny, when was the last time you even talked to one of your employees?" This time I singled her out—my age, small, intense, primed for the fight. The fat man didn't even turn around. He sat, frozen as a stone Buddha, waiting for the moment to pass. I could tell he knew her, nursed old wounds, and was a little gun-shy about taking her on in public. Instead, he muttered something and his buddy nodded solemnly in agreement.

I checked my watch, which had magically, mercifully, raced through the necessary minutes. "Guess we've run out of time. Thanks for coming, folks. And, if you haven't got one already, there are copies of my book on the table in back. Thanks again."

There was smattering of polite applause, but most of the audience rushed for the exit like third graders on the last day of school. A handful of people brought their complimentary copies of *Working for Your Self* up to me for an autograph and I obliged.

In the back of the room, hotel workers set to work clearing the breakfast buffet so they could prepare for a lunchtime seminar, which according to the schedule was titled "Dynamic Point of Purchase Display Ideas for a New Millennium." There was a tidal ebb and flow in this continual process of setting up and breaking down; you could almost hear the waves crash and recede as tables and chairs, napkins and silverware, glasses and serving trays appeared and disappeared over the course of the day.

A young man stacked the remaining copies of my book in an unsteady pile at the end of one of the banquet tables, perhaps hoping that they would disappear on their own. I estimated that fewer than half of the attendees had taken a book. Never a good sign.

After scribbling my signature and then handing a copy back to the next-to-last person in line, I turned my attention to the woman who stood behind him. I saw immediately that she was the one who'd just rescued me from the predatory Lenny. I was pleased she had stayed so I would have a chance to thank her.

She smiled, but said nothing at first. She was small, wore her gray-blonde hair long and in tight curls around her attractive face. She didn't try to conceal her years, but she looked her age beautifully. Her light blue eyes glinted mischievously, in a kind of mocking duet with her smile. Somehow I knew I was the object of her bemusement, though at first I thought it had something to do with that confrontation a moment before. Then, unexpectedly, I felt like the punch line of an old joke as another, younger face emerged through my fog of self-pity and the passing years.

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I recognized her.

"Kate?" My astonishment must have looked ridiculous, like a Halloween mask, because she laughed and nodded.

"Hi, Frank," she said. "You remembered me."

"Of course! What are you doing here? I mean, what are *you* doing here?"

"Working, like you, though not for myself or my *self*, for that matter. I'm the executive director for SCGA, the Southern California Grocers' Association. I'm here on a kind of fact-finding mission, checking out regional differences, that kind of thing. Would you sign my book, famous author?"

She held out a copy, but I didn't reach for it. "God, this is a bolt from the blue. How long has it been?"

She glanced at her watch. "Twenty-eight years, seven months, four days, and eighteen hours. I checked my diary when I saw on the schedule that you were going to be here."

Again, a younger version of her face appeared before me, like a vision. *Remember me?* How could I forget? Kate Thomas had once been so smart, so beautiful, so young, and so ambitious, I felt like I was running full speed just to keep up with her. We'd thought we could do anything, that nothing could stop us. Young people always feel that way, I suppose, but there was something special about the early 1970s. Or so we thought at the time. As it turned out, Kate and I only accomplished one big thing with all that energy and optimism, and that thing had been childish and stupid. It had cost a man his life.

Remember me?

"God," I said, still astonished. "Can I buy you a coffee, Kate? Or something?"

She frowned. "I'm booked all day, but I think this calls for drinks, at least, don't you?"

"At least."

"How about six-ish in the hotel bar, the Irish one?"

I nodded.

"Working for your self, huh, Frank?" she said, and again I caught the full force of that mocking grin I'd found so irresistible in the old days.

"Some days more than others," I replied, shaking my head. "Today won't rate hall of fame status."

She waved her arm dismissively at the empty room. "They wouldn't want to hear your message on their best day or yours, Frank. Most of them are dinosaurs. They think cashiers should be submissive women, stock clerks obedient slaves, and managers

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Marine drill instructors. And that includes, I'm sorry to say, many of the women among them. The corporate brass schedules these seminars for P.R., but nothing much has changed in the stores themselves since we worked together three decades ago."

She flinched when she said that last bit. "How the hell did we get here, Frank?"

I shrugged. "A lot of hard work and a pair of faulty memories, I guess."

She frowned, seemed to pull back without moving a muscle, as if she resented my dredging up the past even though she'd asked the question.

"My memory's pretty intact," she said.

"Yeah, mine too." This brought on an uncomfortable silence. Maybe we both let our memories have their way with us for a minute. It was unavoidable. What we remembered was a plan we'd hatched and executed together when we were old enough to know better, but too young to understand the consequences.

In the fall of 1973, I was the editor, and Kate the advertising sales director, for a food industry trade magazine called *Grocers' World*, a monthly, four-color tabloid. We were based in Boston. Like many trade magazines, ours was the product of intensive effort on the part of a small, underpaid staff that managed, under inhuman pressure, to produce a publication that had all the appearance of the work of a large, highly paid, and motivated staff.

Kate had been with the magazine for two years, and I'd just begun my fourth. Although we took our jobs seriously, in many ways we were still children of the sixties, still infected with the freedom fever of the era. We'd slept together for the hell of it a few times, though neither of us was interested in commitment. We seemed to get along much better as friends, anyway, so we stopped messing around without making much of an issue of it. We liked working together, and we shared a deep-seated hatred for The Man, our boss Ben Franklin ("No relation," he never tired of saying.).

Our lunches together were daily, hour-long bitching sessions, so it was no accident that we first discussed our plan as a joke while eating lunch together at the Full Belly Deli, a dive close to our office building (It's long gone now; I checked the neighborhood a few years ago.). Our plan should have remained a joke, a vicious fantasy designed to blow off a little workplace steam, but it had a longer shelf life than that. Later the same day, the joke became a plot and then a strategy, and we never looked back. No, that's not

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really true. We never stopped looking back, though that wasn't part of the original plan.

"Can we talk about something besides Ben?" Kate asked on the day of our plan's conception. She moved scraps of iceberg lettuce around on her salad plate. "I mean, it's so depressing and unending. Do you know that we just got proofs for the new issue in this morning, with more ad space than any we've ever done, and Ben yelled at me because next month's early sales figures are looking weak? I haven't even really hit the phones yet."

"You're right, let's not talk about him."

"Sorry."

"Gretchen never got yelled at," I said, grinning. Gretchen had been her predecessor.

"Gretchen slept with him. I'd rather listen to his raving and double-dealing, thanks."

"Double-dealer's a good word; could be on his tombstone. I heard him on the phone this morning tell some guy at the Grocers' Association that according to our recent poll sixty-seven percent of all small-box supermarkets in the U.S. pay higher rent per square foot than any of the chain stores over forty thousand square feet."

"Sounds like a Ben-stat, all right."

"Classic Ben-stat. We haven't even finished that poll yet, so it's all based on air."

"Hot air."

"Ben-air. I just started making the calls a couple days ago. He hasn't even talked to me about the early results. But if his estimates are wrong, you know who he'll blame."

"He's a menace," she said.

"A Bond villain, plotting world domination," I said, and offered up my patented Auric Goldfinger impression. *"No, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die."*

"He should be stopped."

"Maybe we should kill him. Mercy killing for the food industry."

Kate shook her head. "Killing's too good for him. Torture. Lots of torture: bamboo slivers under the fingernails, reruns of *The Partridge Family* at high volume, forced reviewing of all the typos in last year's issues."

"No," I said. "Not enough. Too easy. Too quick. We should bring him down slowly, over a long period of time, without his even knowing it until it's too late."

"Poison?"

"Poison, definitely."

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There is innocence at the bedrock of all plans gone horribly awry. I believe this. Just as polluted water is still essentially H_2O, our blowing-off-steam lunchtime bantering did not have to lead to anything else. It wasn't too late to prevent disaster, if we used our heads. Not too late at all.

And then, surprisingly, it was.

Every great plan needs a catalyst, and if Ben was nothing else, he was a first-class catalyst. An hour after lunch, I was back at my desk, making calls to retailers for an article I would write on the current business climate. Actually, it was the same article I wrote every month, the same article almost every trade magazine writer in the country wrote every month, with just a light twist each time to make it appear new. In January, I asked how the holiday season sales had been; in March, how the winter had been; in July, how the year had been thus far; and after Labor Day, how the coming holiday season looked.

If the phone calls were always the same, so was Ben's reaction. My office and Kate's were located on either side of Ben's and he insisted that the connecting doors be kept open at all times. He was, in his intrusive, inconsistent, and often pointless way, a hands-on publisher.

I had just finished speaking with the public relations director for a chain of small-box stores in the Southeast. I did not expect Ben to bother me about the retailer calls. He tended to be more curious about supplier pieces because suppliers were potential advertisers, and often he would move directly from questioning me about an interview to forcing Kate to call that supplier as soon as possible, while their memory of our interest in their opinion was fresh. It was an obvious, crass, and annoying ploy for all concerned, but classic Ben. Both Kate and I fielded his idiotic questions and demands all day long, every day. They were something you could depend upon, like horseflies at a picnic or rats at a dump.

After I hung up, Ben's voice crackled through the open door between our offices.

"Frank?"

I didn't answer at first, my small rebellion. I'd thought about closing that door many times, locking it, maybe even nailing up a few boards and pushing furniture in front of it, but Ben was the boss and this was his show. I waited for him to call my name again. It was more annoying when it took this long for Ben to say what was on his mind, like I had to hold my breath, but I couldn't resist taunting him.

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"Who was that?" came the high-pitched, nasally voice again.

"Vic Macom, P.R. and marketing guy for Red Diamond Stores."

"What did he say?"

"Looks good for the fall. He thinks they'll find a five or six percent gain by the end of the quarter."

"Bullshit."

"That's what the man says. I can't put words in his mouth."

"Who'd you talk to?"

"Vic Macom."

"He's just the P.R. guy. They'll give you bullshit every time."

"That's his job."

"It's not your job, though, is it?" There was a moment's pause, as if Ben actually had to think about what advice to give, as if he didn't give the same damn advice every time. "Call back. Talk to Peter Morton. He's the main man. Go right to Peter."

"I already asked when I called. He's on vacation."

Silence. I could smell Ben thinking, like tires burning. Let it go for once, I whispered. Let me do my job. Shut up, shut up, shut up.

"Does Rick O'Neill still work for them?" asked Ben.

"I don't know."

"Find out. Rick's a good man. We're old friends."

I had discovered when I first started working here that Ben's friendships tended to hinge on who did or did not advertise with the magazine. Who Ben owed money to was another big factor. More than once I had been caught in the crossfire between Ben and one of his so-called friends.

"Rick's the number two honcho. He's good for a quote."

No, I thought. "Okay."

Ben suddenly appeared in the doorway. A slender, middle-aged man who wore a suit to work every day, he tried hard to look hip with his thin, puffed-up hair and his modishly designed, sometimes blindingly colored ties, but it didn't work. We thought he was just old and pathetic.

"Frank, did I ever tell you about the time I drove a Formula One race car at that test track in Germany?" He'd told this stupid story a hundred times, beginning the day I mentioned that in high school I had once worked on a pit crew Saturday nights for a friend's dirt-track stock car. Since finding that out, Ben often talked about racing when he wanted to make a point.

"I think you did tell me that one."

Ben walked over and sat on the edge of my desk. "Well, Frank, here's the thing. When I drove that sleek little machine,

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I felt this power like nothing I'd ever felt before—the acceleration, the cornering, the sheer exhilaration of controlling that rocket with the flick of my wrist on the steering wheel."

"Uh-huh." Go to hell.

"The point is you have to start thinking like a driver, Frank. You've been on the pit crew too long. You think like a pit crew guy. Being an editor is about controlling momentum, about not taking no for an answer, about steering your interview with such control and subtlety that, even though they have all the power, you're the one who gets to where you want to go."

"Everybody does things their own way, Ben. Everybody's got their own style."

"Style, Frank. That's it, you're absolutely right. Your style—and I'm sorry if this hurts your feelings—your style is that of a tire changer for a dirt-track stock car. This magazine is Formula One. Don't get me wrong, Frank. I'm not saying you're doing a bad job here. I'm saying the sky's the limit and you're still on the highway. I'm talking possibilities. Big picture."

"Big picture."

"Driver's seat, Frank. Get behind the wheel for a change! Why shouldn't you drive? I couldn't imagine being part of a race team and not being the driver. Don't let them see the dirt and sweat that it actually takes to crank out this magazine. That's for the grease monkeys in the pit. Show them the paint job, Frank. Take 'em for a spin at a hundred and ninety miles an hour. You're in the driver's seat, now. Okay?"

"Yeah." No. Go to hell, Ben.

After Ben had left for the day, I went into Kate's office and slumped in one of the two chairs in front of her desk. She was on the phone, talking to an advertiser. "Damn!" she yelled a millisecond after slamming the phone into its cradle. Then she grinned.

"No luck?"

"Stupid bastard. How are you?"

I shrugged. "Want to get a drink?"

"Can't. Ben says I have to make all the West Coast calls before I go home. I'll be here at least until nine."

"Did you hear him give me crap about my call earlier."

She nodded as she logged something into a notebook by her phone. "You remember what we talked about at lunch, Frank?"

"Bamboo under the fingernails?"

"Yeah, bamboo. That call I just had? He wanted to place a quarter-page ad and I talked him down to a sixth-page."

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"Why?"

She shook her head, unable to believe it herself. "Ben told me I had to push him up to a half-page, and as I was trying, something snapped. I don't know. Instead, I told him he didn't need that kind of space to get his message across, but what I was really thinking was how ballistic Ben will get when he finds out what happened."

"It's going to cost you commission money. What's Ben going to say?"

She grinned as she tore a page from her notebook and crumpled it up, then tossed it into a trash can nearby. "I'll tell Ben that I pushed hard just like he wanted and the guy got pissed and cut back on the size instead. I'll make it Ben's fault."

"His fault."

"His fault."

That was just the beginning. It wasn't hard to do—much too easy, really. Ben's abrasive personality made him a walking, talking, big bull's-eye for the subterfuge we had in mind. I kept thinking about his race car analogy, because now we were driving Ben, pointing him subtly, and at just the right level of excessive speed, into a dangerous corner. The natural powers of centrifugal force would do the rest.

Sometimes we talked about our guerrilla actions, but mostly we just did them—here a lost ad, there a damaging misquote, here a key typo that forced Ben to rerun a full-page ad free of charge, there a false rumor about our boss planted offhandedly with a client or interviewee. It all began as a small, mischievous series of pranks, then gradually became addictive and beyond our control, spreading like a virus throughout the industry.

Nothing we did was obviously malicious, nothing he could mistake for anything but honest mistakes, nothing that stood out from the general efficiency of our work. He might blow his stack at us, but he never seemed to be aware of the plot and we never gave him cause to suspect. If anything, we worked harder, put in extra hours, apparently trying to stave off imminent disaster. The overall effect, however, was that our acts of sabotage gradually ate away at the reputations of both Ben and his magazine. We brought him to his knees, even as we positioned ourselves to look as much like victims as everyone else.

It took us almost two years. You have that kind of time when you're young. We convinced ourselves we were retail revolutionaries, grocery guerrillas. We were certain he deserved it.

To our surprise, to our shock really, Ben never caught on to our

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revolution, and then, during a particularly lean time for advertising in the late seventies, the seeds we'd sown bore poisonous fruit and the magazine teetered toward bankruptcy. That was when I left, followed soon after by Kate. Within the year, Ben sold out for next to nothing to a predatory publishing house that stripped the place clean and eventually dissolved the publication altogether.

I headed for the Midwest—Minneapolis. Kate ran to the West Coast. We promised to stay in touch, but I did not hear from her until six months later when she called me after midnight on a cool spring evening.

"Frank?"

"Yeah."

"It's Kate."

"Kate? How . . ."

"He's dead."

"Who? Who's dead?"

"Ben."

"Dead? How?"

She didn't reply at first. Then she whispered, "Suicide. We killed him."

The crowd near the bar dwindles as, for the moment at least, everyone seems to have the drinks they need. Kate sips her wine and smiles. I forgot that smile somehow. How did I manage to remember all the crap we went through together, but forget that smile?

"Well, Frank," she finally says. "I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours. Life, I mean."

"Okay, though mine's been less than exciting; I kind of fell into my career after I left the magazine. I tried finding work as an editor, but the first job that opened up was as a P.R. assistant at the main office of Carbone's, the big Midwest chain. A friend got me in and I wrote hideous press releases for a couple of years. After I'd covered a few of their in-house management seminars, I convinced my friend to take me on in his department as a management trainer. It was all a con job on my part, but I'd interviewed and watched these people for so many years that I knew how to play the game. As you'll remember, I'm the last of the great bullshit artists. And, as you said this morning, these companies don't really want to change anything; they just want a front so they can say they're trying to change things. It

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worked so well that I went independent as a management consultant during the early nineties and I've been running ever since. I've forgotten what my house looks like. I know it's located somewhere a couple thousand miles east of this table. Hope to see it again."

"And you wrote a book."

"I organized my notes. It's not the same thing. I couldn't even give it away this morning."

"Don't be so modest."

"What about you, Kate?"

"Oh, I spent about five years in marketing with SoCal Foods in San Diego, was pretty successful, which wiped out the stain of having left a loser magazine. They forget fast in this business. Then I took a job in L.A. with Foodway in their advertising department. That was a mistake, but the money was outrageous and I got trapped. It took me almost ten years to chew off my paw and escape."

"Ten years. Why so long?

"I was married to my job, literally; I married my boss. Kind of funny, considering, right?"

"Are you still married?"

She shakes her head. "I left him and the job in '96, went to work for the SCGA, and I've been there ever since."

"Any kids?"

"No. You?"

I nod. "Two daughters. They live with their mother in Connecticut—another long story."

"Ah."

"Yeah. Sounds like you've had a good run, though. Your career, I mean."

"I have a lot of freedom, actually; unexpected power, even. I get to harass dinosaurs like the old boy who got after you at the seminar this morning, and since I don't work for any of them, they have to deal with me as an equal, at least on paper."

I sip my drink and watch all the happy people mingle and laugh. They seem to be drinking hard and with purpose, the way you seldom see people drink anymore.

"Do you ever feel like a complete fraud, Kate?" I catch her by surprise with that one, as if I've broken a truce we both knew wouldn't last, but hoped to sustain as long as we could. She follows my gaze to where a handsome young man unconsciously spills drops of his beer on the dress of a woman who gazes up at him, neither of them conscious of the damage being done for sev-

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eral seconds. Then the woman feels a chill and glances down, jumps back, and flees the scene. The young man has already switched the beer to his left hand, while his right hangs suspended in the air before him as if he still plans to brush the beer away from the now vanished woman's dress.

"I don't think about it," Kate replies. "At least I haven't in a long time. Did you ever tell anybody?"

I shake my head. "It's funny, really. No, it's not funny at all. But when I'm with people my age and they get to talking about the sixties, which for most of them actually means the early- to mid-seventies, and they get nostalgic for good rock and roll, protests, and free sex, I clam up. What am I supposed to say? Oh, those *were* the days. I killed a guy."

"We didn't kill him, Frank."

I can't respond. I watch her. She watches me. Despite her words, her face betrays the long argument she's had with herself all these years. I recognize the expression because I've seen a version of it in my mirror almost every day of my adult life. I wave to a passing waitress and order us more drinks. It isn't a solution, but then this isn't a problem that seems destined for a solution anyway. "Have you ever told anybody?"

"My therapist, indirectly," she says.

"Meaning?"

"Well, I didn't actually use the old 'I have this friend . . .' dodge, but it was almost that bad. I turned it into a fantasy about my current boss."

"But you like your job, you said."

"Fantasy, Frank. It's therapeutic."

"What was your therapist's reaction?"

"She said I carried a load of guilt from something I'd done as a child."

"Not so far off base. We were pretty childish."

"But we didn't kill him, Frank." She stresses every syllable, though I'm not sure who she's trying hardest to convince, me or herself. "All the awful stuff that happened later was too complicated for just one source. Ben reacted to a whole pile of stuff, not just what we did. The man was a mess, and losing his business was just a small part of it. Don't you think he would've driven that magazine into the ground with or without our help? And his wife left him before things even went bad. Do you think she blames herself? He drank too much. He had no friends. He was an accident waiting to happen. I truly believe that."

"You're right, Kate. I know all this. I couldn't have gone on,

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stayed in the business, if I'd really believed that some prank I pulled as a kid cost a guy his life. I know. And I don't believe it's that simple, but seeing you again today . . . now, I don't know so much after all."

"Yeah," she says, surprising me with a look of absolute empathy just when I was starting to think she might convince me to let it all go.

More drinks arrive, sent over by someone Kate knows. I follow her gaze to a skinny young guy at the bar, who waves and grins, then raises a glass of beer in a toast. She waves back.

"Friend or foe?" I ask.

"Neither. Colleague. Just letting me know that I'll be hearing all about this meeting with a mysterious stranger tomorrow. Cheers." She laughs, lifts her glass and I raise mine to meet it. "It's funny that you said you don't think about Ben's death anymore, at least until today. You know what I was thinking this morning during your talk, Frank?"

"What?"

"I was thinking that you've made a whole career out of that moment, out of what we did. I read your book last week. I felt like I could substitute Ben's name in every place where you used words like 'management' or 'boss' or 'administration.' I felt like I was reading a secret code, like the book had been written just for me. At one point you wrote that if people work every minute like a boss is looking over their shoulder, they never have to worry about the boss actually looking over their shoulder. You wrote a book about self-respect in the workplace, but all I could see was the paranoia. You haven't forgotten a thing, have you, Frank? And you haven't really forgiven either one of us."

"Not us, me."

"Us, Frank."

"Are you Catholic, Kate?"

"No, collapsed Presbyterian."

"Well, I used to be Catholic. I was an altar boy. There was a lot of crap that went along with being Catholic, but you know the one thing I miss about it?"

"Confession, I'd guess."

I smile and nod. "Think about an autumn afternoon, in that spooky early twilight that hits for a while in November. You climb the steps of a church with this load of guilt, open that big oak door, and walk inside. It's so damn quiet—a few old ladies waiting their turn to confess nothing much, a couple of kids up by the

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altar saying their penance, the murmur of secretive voices coming from the confessional box."

"Serene."

"Yeah. So you wait your turn, and then you go in and the priest is finishing up with the person on the other side. You wait. You feel fat with guilt, nauseous with guilt, and then the little door slides open and you begin: 'Bless me Father for I have sinned. It's been one week since my last confession.' You tell him you swore, you were disobedient, you lied, small-time stuff because that's all you've got, and afterward you go up front and say your ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys. When you come out of that church, it's dark and the street lights are on, and you feel drunk almost. You feel clean."

"Innocent."

"Yeah, innocent."

"You want to confess, Frank?"

I shrug. "There's nothing to confess, is there? Not any more. Maybe there never was, but how do you shake a ghost, Kate? Ben subletted part of my soul, and I guess I've had to learn how to make room for him."

"Like cancer."

"If it was cancer they could operate."

"Like a possession then?"

"Maybe."

"I can't forgive you, Frank."

"I know."

We watch the crowd swirl around us, almost choreographed. The sound of a piano comes from somewhere on the other side of the room. What's that song? "Hey Jude." Three television sets above the bar show a college basketball game—Illinois and Michigan State. Play-by-play commentary for the hearing-impaired appears below the action like subtitles on a foreign movie. "The Spartans are in a rebuilding year," I read, and then, "They'll be a load of trouble for some teams this year."

Kate stares into space. I feel I should do something, say something. What? Maybe just touch her hand, nod toward the door, take a walk up South Michigan Avenue in the cool night air, invite her to my room, where we can hang on to each other through the night like shipwreck survivors. Pray for dawn.

But this isn't an old friendship we share, or an old love. It is a wound. So I don't reach for her hand. Instead, I rub my fingers against my temples. The pain in my head feels like momentary absolution.

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THE GORILLA MURDERS

O'NEIL DE NOUX

The gigantic stature, the prodigious strength and activity, the wild ferocity . . . I understood the full horrors of the murder at once.
From "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" by Edgar Allan Poe

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1889, 3 A.M.

Detective Jacques Dugas climbed out of the dormer window, carefully setting his feet on the slanted roof of the Creole cottage. His left hand clinging to the window sill, he raised the gas lamp in his right hand and looked down at narrow Chartres Street, at the rain-slick cobblestones and the gaslights along the street glowing in the fog, each surrounded by yellow halos. Making sure of his footing, Dugas let go of the window and followed the pitch of the roof around the dormer.

"Over here," a voice called from above. It was a uniformed cop, standing twenty feet away, next to the firewall separating the cottage from the next building of the French Quarter. The cop stood in the halo of his own lamp, fog slithering around him. Dugas could make out the officer's pale blue bowler and matching pale blue New Orleans Police shirt, but the man's face remained in shadow as he looked down at the crumpled corpse at his feet.

A river breeze flowed over Dugas, bringing the strong scents of the riverfront, fish and mud, the fog like tiny droplets washing across his face. Before climbing up, Dugas studied the body as it

For my old partner Marco, who taught me how to catch a killer.

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lay on its side. She was in a white nightdress; her long gray hair covered her face as if it had been caught in a windstorm.

"Did you speak with the man Jules?" The copper was looking at Dugas now. A lanky man in his late twenties, the copper had dark muttonchops and a thick mustache.

"Yes," Dugas answered as he arrived. Dugas, six feet tall, one hundred sixty pounds, dark brown eyes, wore his dark brown hair parted down the middle and his moustache neatly trimmed. At twenty-four, Dugas was the youngest and newest detective assigned to the Detective Bureau, one of the few French-American policemen on a New Orleans Police Force dominated by Irishmen.

"I'm Doran," the copper said, rolling his "r" with a typical Irish lilt. "Patrick John. Did that Jules fella tell ya what he saw?"

"Yes."

Jules Blanc, occupant of the Creole cottage beneath them, had heard a noise on the roof. A light sleeper, he opened his dormer window and heard the noise again. Blanc, forty years old, barely five feet tall, portly and balding, spoke in excitable French. Usually Dugas insisted on using English, but there was no stopping Blanc's story.

"I heard the sound again, a clumping sound, and leaned out of the dormer and saw a shadow cross the roof. I stepped from the window and saw a man carrying what I thought was a sack. He saw me as I raised my lamp and dropped the sack. I didn't notice it was a woman at first because I was staring at the most hideous face."

Blanc had grabbed the collar of Dugas's brown suit coat. "It was not a man at all. It was a *gorilla!* Huge and hunched. It dropped the woman and jumped over the firewall, and I could see it lumbering away quickly with sure feet on the slick roof. I tell you it was not a man. It was a gorilla!"

Dugas had tried to calm the man and had him repeat his description of the "gorilla," but Blanc insisted he saw the grotesque face in the lamplight and it was a huge ape with black fur.

Carefully placing his lamp next to the body, Dugas went down on his haunches as he told Doran, "I'm Dugas. Jacques. What did you see when you came up here?"

"Just what you're seeing."

Dugas pointed to the wet footprints, shoeless footprints, leading away from the body. "Can you track those footprints and see where they lead?"

"What footprints?" Doran sounded annoyed until he leaned

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closer and saw what Dugas was pointing at. "Oh. Yes." Doran switched his lamp to his left hand and pulled out his service revolver as he climbed over the brick firewall.

"Call out if you see anything!"

"Ay," Doran answered. "That I will."

Dugas examined the body, noticing the tiny, wrinkled hands, the lone white slipper on her left foot. Slowly, he peeled aside her hair until her face was visible as well as the bluish purple bruising around her throat. Strangulation. Her protruding tongue seemed to confirm this. Dugas checked her wrist to be certain. Cool already, there was no sign of a pulse. She was around sixty and small, maybe five-two. She couldn't have weighed a hundred pounds.

Dugas stood and looked through the foggy night air at the adjoining rooftops, some bumping against one another, others a few feet apart. Although he could only see to the next roof, he knew the roofs provided an nearly unbroken highway over the houses to the next street.

By the time Doran returned, Dugas had searched the roof of Blanc's cottage, noting how the still-wet footprints came from the direction of Decatur Street.

"He went right over the edge of the last building," Doran said, raising his lamp high as he slipped his revolver back into the black holster on his right hip. "Like he jumped from the last building right into the trees along Esplanade."

Dugas envisioned the tall oaks lining the neutral ground along the center of Esplanade Avenue. A leap into the trees would be impossible for any man—or ape, for that matter.

"Show me," Dugas said. Doran shrugged and led the way back across the rooftops. They had to climb atop several two story buildings, reaching up easily along exterior pipes and brick chimneys, and had to jump only twice, over narrow spaces between buildings before reaching the last building, a three story townhouse. Doran pointed to the oaks. Dugas leaned over the edge of the building and saw, along the wrought-iron balcony, a potted plant had been overturned.

"He shimmied down the balcony," Dugas said as he rose. He noted the address in his notes. By the time they'd returned to the body, two white-clad coroner's men were climbing out of Blanc's dormer window. They carried a white stretcher and were followed by a young man in a white jacket, who explained he was an intern at Charity Hospital and would examine the body and pronounce death. Dugas secured his name: Donald Conner.

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The young intern could add nothing to Dugas's original diagnosis of the cause of death. After his examination, he was quick to refer Dugas to the impending autopsy for details and stood back to allow the body to be placed on the stretcher and tied down.

"You will forward your report to me," Dugas told Doran as the uniformed officer started for the dormer.

"Ay," Doran said. "That I will."

As the men with the stretcher carefully moved toward the dormer window, a man in a black suit and a short black derby came out of the window and worked his way around the stretcher toward Dugas. Dugas recognized him as Joe Rathlee, one of the senior detectives.

Rathlee, forty-two years old, five-seven, two hundred pounds, was a broad-shouldered, heavy-jawed man with reddish brown hair, a matching handlebar mustache, and hazel eyes. Reaching Dugas, Rathlee sat, pulled off his derby, and wiped his brow as he said, "Second one in a week."

"Second what?"

"That's what ya get for goin' on a vacation, Monsieur le Detective." Rathlee winked at Dugas. "Last Tuesday. On Royal Street, near St. Philip. Sixty-five-year-old spinster. Sophie Letulle. Found on a roof. She was strangled."

Dugas felt his stomach bottom out for a moment before he said, "Come with me."

Raising his lamp, Dugas led the way over the opposite firewall, tracing the marks left by the killer, back in the direction from which the killer had come. As they moved around chimneys and dormers, Dugas described the body of the old woman and told Rathlee about what Jules Blanc saw and how the killer had crossed all the way to Esplanade before descending a balcony to the avenue.

"My victim lived alone in an apartment on Hospital Street," said Rathlee, panting as he struggled to keep up with a hurrying Dugas, fearful of the trail drying up. "The place was ransacked. Jewelry boxes overturned. Even the bathroom cupboards emptied," Rathlee huffed.

The two continued toward Decatur Street. A pigeon, surprised by Dugas, fluttered away, almost tumbling Rathlee to the street below. Dugas snatched Rathlee's coat and held on.

"Holy Mother of God!" Rathlee grabbed a brick chimney and then laughed at himself. "That would 'a been embarrassin'!"

Dugas found a shred of cloth caught on a shingle that seemed to match his victim's nightdress. Atop a narrow, two story house

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overlooking Barracks Street, just up from Decatur, Dugas found the woman's missing slipper. Going down on his stomach, he leaned over the edge of the roof and saw a black lace wrought-iron balcony below with supports reaching up to the overhang.

Handing his lantern to Rathlee, Dugas swung his legs over and slipped his feet between the intricate lace pattern of the balcony's support column.

"My lamp," Dugas said, reaching back. He took his lantern down to the balcony and left it next to the open french doors, where pink curtains flowed through the doors in the breeze.

Dugas called back up to Rathlee. "I'll climb back up and you can give me your lamp and then follow me down."

Holding his derby as he leaned down, Rathlee chuckled. "I'll go back through Blanc's dormer. You can let me in downstairs. No way this shanty-boy's shimmering down a balcony." He meant shimmying, of course, and was off before Dugas could argue.

Standing in the open french doors, Dugas pulled the curtain out of the way and reached in with his lamp. Ransacked. Dressers were overturned, bed turned over, chifforobe lying face down on the floor among broken shards of bric-a-brac.

Carefully moving through the bedroom, Dugas stepped down the hall, found a second bedroom also ransacked, and went downstairs to the dining room and living room. He found the front door key hanging on a chain just inside the door and opened it as Rathlee arrived, winded again.

The detectives lit up the place, putting matches to the gas lamps in each room as they searched. The house was stuffy and smelled of mildew. They found an empty coin purse on the living room floor and a wooden box with the torn corner of a five dollar bill stuck to the edge of the box lid. Upstairs they found three jewelry boxes emptied. Dugas found his victim's name on a bill from the gas company: Eloise Gainne. He found her age in the flyleaf of the large Bible lying upside down on the living room floor. Eloise was fifty-five, widow of Pierre Gainne who died in 1880, mother of Marie Gainne, born in New Orleans in 1867. The daughter was two years younger than Dugas.

Dugas looked in every closet, even the one beneath the stairs, holding his breath, letting it out each time he did not find the daughter's body.

"I don't think the daughter lives here," Rathlee concluded. "Other bedroom looks like a guest room." Dugas agreed, the guest room closet was filled with the clothes of an older lady, not a woman in her twenties.

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"I found how he got in," Dugas said, pointing to the back door of the house with its shattered frame, splinters of wood on the kitchen floor. The kitchen was the only room not disturbed.

"There's no money or jewelry in a kitchen, usually," Rathlee said, then told Dugas how his mother always kept the house money in a flour can on her kitchen counter.

Dugas found letters from the daughter, still wrapped in pink ribbon, on the victim's bedroom floor beneath an upended vanity. Marie Gainne attended Magnolia College in Magnolia, Mississippi. Dugas jotted the address to give to the coroner's office so they could notify her. He'd heard of Magnolia College, an exclusive women's college, high academics.

Daylight was creeping through the French Quarter, giving a pale gray light to the fog, as Dugas and Rathlee stepped from Eloise Gainne's house and went to the houses on either side. No one in any of the nearby houses heard or saw anything. Heard nothing, not even furniture tossed around. Dugas was amazed.

"Don't be surprised, boyo." Rathlee shrugged. "These firewalls are pretty thick."

As they headed for Esplanade Avenue, Dugas asked Rathlee about his case.

"Slow down," Rathlee said. "I'm not skinny like you." He took in a deep breath and explained how a barking dog on a balcony across the street brought attention to the body of his victim as it lay on a roof next to a skylight. It was noon when the body was found. Took Rathlee the better part of the day to locate where the body had come from.

"Back door was broken in," he explained. "It was in all the papers. Didn't you vacation across the lake? They get the papers there, don't they?"

Dugas explained he was on *vacation*. Never looked at the papers as he spent a quiet week at the Mandeville Inn Resort on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, reading Dickens, eating well, and flirting with the cook's daughter, a blue-eyed darling with long auburn hair. Flirting was as far as they'd gone, but it was nice nonetheless.

The owner of the house on Esplanade, whose balcony the killer had used to reach the street, wouldn't let the police officers inside, insisting they must be mistaken. No, she hadn't heard anything, the middle-aged woman with graying hair said, shushing her son when he tried to remind her that their dog had awakened them with persistent barking in the middle of the night.

"What time was that?"

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"It was the middle of the night," the woman said as she slowly closed her door.

"You said two thirty," the boy called out as the door closed.

Rathlee yawned. Dappled sunlight filtered through the oaks along the neutral ground and Dugas noticed the fog had vanished.

"Can you work those houses?" Dugas pointed up the avenue. "I'll take the houses from here to the corner."

The canvass of Esplanade Avenue produced nothing. Dugas received more response from the chirping mockingbirds bouncing between the branches of the oaks than from the close-mouthed people. Meeting at the corner of Esplanade and Chartres Street, Rathlee suggested breakfast before Dugas headed for the autopsy, which only caused Dugas's stomach to flip.

The two walked up Esplanade to a small café just before Rampart Street, where Dugas had two cups of coffee-and-chicory, black with sugar only, while Rathlee had a "light" breakfast of three eggs sunny side up, bacon, grits, four buttermilk biscuits, and a thick slice of ham and three cups of café au lait.

"This is going to be bad when it hits the papers," Rathlee said, sopping egg yolk with a biscuit. "Especially once this Blanc tells his gorilla story." He stuffed half a biscuit in his mouth and continued while chewing, "I tell you, boyo, I've been canvassing the hell outta the Quarter since last Tuesday. Even talkin' to the Wops, the ones that don't pretend they don't speak English. I got nothin'."

Dugas took a sip of the strong coffee and thought how the French Quarter was quickly becoming a Sicilian slum, the old houses crumbling, many filling with the extended families of recent immigrants. The flowing words of the Italian language, even when spoken quickly or harshly, never bothered Dugas as it did the Irishmen on the force.

"You should eat," Rathlee said.

"Not before an autopsy."

Rathlee smiled. "Then I'll eat for both of us since I ain't goin', me laddie. I'll go do the daily report for ya at the bureau and wait for you there. Then we'll solve this thing together or me mother's a Protestant."

Dugas had to smile back at the grinning face as Rathlee started in on a second chunk of ham the size of Dugas's hand.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1889, 8 A.M.

Armed with the confirmation that Eloise Gainne was indeed strangled to death, Dugas stepped from the morgue at the rear of Charity Hospital and flapped his coat in a vain attempt to rid

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himself of the stench of formaldehyde and whatever other chemicals the coroner used to preserve bodies. The coroner had placed the time of death between ten P.M. and two A.M.

In the clenched left hand of the victim, they'd found three strands of coarse black hair, four inches in length. The coroner speculated the hair came from the killer's head and preserved the hair as potential evidence.

Dugas stopped by a newsstand and picked up the morning papers, the French language *L'Abeille* and the English language *Louisiana Gazette.* Neither had the Gainne story but there was a small follow-up story on Rathlee's case on page three of *L'Abeille.* A piece of jewelry, thought to have belonged to Rathlee's victim, had been found in a Canal Street jewelry store. Quick work by Detective Rathlee, with the cooperation of the jeweler, showed it not to be one of the missing items taken from Sophie Letulle's house.

Passing through a crowd of blue uniforms, shift change at the Central Police Station, Dugas stepped out onto South Basin Street in order to get around to the front door of the stationhouse. Upstairs, on his small desk at the rear corner of the Detective Bureau, he found a neat report penned by Rathlee and an even neater, hand-printed report by Patrolman Patrick John Doran.

Dugas poured himself a cup of coffee-and-chicory from the pot bubbling on the stove near the front of the office and took his mug back to his desk to write his report. It took him an hour. He clipped both Rathlee's and Doran's report to his, finished the remains of the coffee, and grabbed his coat. He dropped the reports on his captain's desk in a wooden box marked INCOMING and started down the stairs.

A commotion stopped him as Rathlee, puffing as he ascended the stairs, led six other detectives up into the bureau.

"Got a suspect," Rathlee announced. "Me and the bulls are going out to get him, soon as we grab more ammo."

Dugas followed Rathlee to his desk near the center of the bureau. The other detectives spread out to their desks, each digging out extra pistols and ammunition. Hunched over, they looked like bulls, or maybe buffaloes.

"His name's Sal Pozzolo, Salvatore, Sal-the-Finger, known burglar," Rathlee said, dropping bullets into his coat pockets. He looked up and winked. "A Mustache-Pete. Guinea. From, you guessed it, Vendetta Alley." Rathlee grinned. "Need any extra ammo?"

Dugas shook his head as he went to his own desk and dug out

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his ammo pouch with twenty-four additional rounds to go with the six in his snub-nosed .38 Smith & Wesson, nickel plated with beveled walnut grips. Unconsciously, he patted his weapon as it sat in its leather holster on his belt on his right hip.

"Let's go," Rathlee announced, leading the way down to the paddy wagon, where everyone piled in. Dugas held on to the strap as the wagon hurried down South Basin toward Canal Street. "Sal-the-Finger is a Sicilian cat burglar," Rathlee explained, "specializing in thieving after dark, known for resisting arrest. A real criminal."

Two of the bulls were slapping their hands with blackjacks, lead-filled black leather saps.

"This oughta be fun," Rathlee said as the wagon turned down Canal for Decatur Street and the long line of bars and cafes and small businesses, riverfront blockhouses, and warehouses occupied by Sicilians—the lawless area known as Vendetta Alley, where bodies of dark-skinned men with thick mustaches were too frequently found lying in gutters.

"Long as they kill each other," Rathlee said, as if he could read Dugas's thoughts, "fine by me. Civic improvement, if you ask me. But if they're killing old ladies, that's another thing."

The saps slapped the hands in response.

Dugas took out his notebook and pencil. "What does this Sal-the-Finger look like?"

Rathlee pulled out his notes. "Typical Mustache-Pete. Dark skinned, handlebar mustache, brown eyes, brown hair. Stands five-one, weighs a hundred ten."

"Short one," one of the bulls said.

Too short, Dugas thought. Although he strongly doubted Blanc's assertion that his killer was a gorilla, Dugas was as sure his killer wasn't five-one. Dugas told Rathlee about the strands of black hair found in his victim's hand.

"Dark brown hair, coarse, the strands look black one at a time," Rathlee said, "sounds like a Guinea to me."

"How did he surface?" Dugas asked. "As a suspect."

Rathlee became suddenly serious. "Good old-fashioned police work, boyo."

Dugas waited and Rathlee laughed and said, "Anonymous tip."

Probably from another Mustache-Pete, thought Dugas. Turning in a competitor or settling a vendetta via the police. The bulls said nothing, not even looking at Dugas, as they slapped their saps in eager anticipation.

What followed didn't live up to the anticipation. The police assault along Decatur Street wasn't violent at all. The sight of the

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big Irish bulls was enough to cow everyone. Crossing Decatur, Dugas took the river side of the street. He spoke with eleven Sicilian dockworkers, all big, burly men with coarse, dark brown hair. Each claimed to know nothing of the murders and never heard of anyone named Pozzolo or Sal-the-Finger. It occurred to Dugas, each of these men could be mistaken for large apes, especially at night in a fog. But not short Sal-the-Finger.

The afternoon air was laced with loathing for the police and the strong scents of garlic and tomato gravy from the kitchens, scents that started Dugas's stomach rumbling.

"I'm going to canvass back around Barracks Street," Dugas told Rathlee.

"I'll let you know when we catch the bastard."

Leaving from the futile attempt at locating Sal-the-Finger, Dugas continued along Decatur, stopping just beyond Jackson Square at a small eatery called Mama Lena's for a delicious bowl of spaghetti with meat sauce, garlic bread, and beer so cold it chilled his throat, all served by a nervous but friendly Sicilian matron. The old woman was pleased at Dugas's appetite as he dug in. He made sure he left a generous tip.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1889, 5 P.M.

The blocks around his victim's house proved as fruitless for witnesses and information as Vendetta Alley. Most of the occupants of the lower French Quarter, though still mostly of Creole descent from original French or Spanish settlers, were as leery of the authorities as the Sicilians, even when Dugas spoke to them in their native tongues. He went from door to door along Barracks Street, both sides of the street, from Decatur up to Chartres and over to Esplanade.

With weary legs and eyes beginning to burn from lack of sleep, Dugas headed home in the waning twilight. Clouds hid the moon and stars, and soon the only light came from the glowing gaslights, which left most of each block in darkness as Dugas left Esplanade behind for the narrow, winding streets of the Faubourg Marigny, to the small Creole cottage he shared with his aunt.

Monday night meant red beans and rice with a breaded pork chop, one of the oldest traditions in a city full of traditions. Dugas could picture his aunt, like most New Orleans women, starting the beans in the morning, letting them simmer all day while she did the wash.

He picked up his step.

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1889, 8 A.M.

Dugas stopped for the newspaper boys at the corner of Frenchmen Street and Esplanade. The boys hawked their papers quickly, in tandem, one selling *L'Abeille*, the other the *Gazette*.

Tucking the papers under his arm, Dugas slipped into the tiny café outside Hotel Rousse on Esplanade, just across from the U.S. Mint. He ordered a croissant with his coffee-and-chicory and sat at a backside table to read the *Gazette's* short account of the Gainne murder and *L'Abeille's* two-page story, entitled "Gorilla Killer in Vieux Carré." Beneath the headline was a line drawing of a hulking creature, part man, part ape, face hidden in shadow, eyes shining brightly, staring directly at the reader as it stood in the fog atop a French Quarter roof. Dugas could not help but shiver at the image, the huge arms, the wide hands. He closed his eyes and could see Eloise Gainne's small, wrinkled hands, her body lying crumpled on the cold rooftop.

The story was mostly Blanc's account of what he'd seen. With lurid detail, the story read like a penny-novel, sensational in its use of superlatives and exclamation points. When he spoke with Dugas, Blanc never mentioned the way the gorilla killer growled, nor the full moon beaming down on its hideous face.

Folding the paper, Dugas took a sip of his coffee. Nibbling on the croissant, trying to ease the biting inside his jittery stomach, Dugas realized there was no full moon the previous night. He'd seen the moon, momentarily, hovering over the rooftops. It was a crescent moon. What else had Blanc made up?

On his way back through the Quarter, Dugas asked every passerby if they'd seen anything or heard anything about the crimes. He extended his door-to-door canvass along Chartres beyond the Gainne house and eventually over to Royal past the Letulle house.

Heading up St. Ann Street to catch the streetcar to the Central Police Station, Dugas spotted a group of excited boys following a man pushing a small wooden cart. One boy picked up a stick and threw it at the man, bouncing it off the man's shoulder, causing the other boys to howl with taunts. The man cowered away from the boys as Dugas hurried toward them. Another boy threw a rock, striking the man. Dugas shouted, *"Policia! Policia!"*

The boys, nearly all in striped shirts and shorts, shouted at each other in Italian as they scattered. Dugas caught up to the man at the corner and the man was as frightened of Dugas as he'd been of the boys.

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"Are you all right?" Dugas asked, showing the man his badge. Although he was bent over, he was as tall as Dugas, with small, darting eyes and a large jaw. He slobbered as he spoke in a deep, guttural voice, "I'm okay." The man wore a black hat and coat and coarse dungarees, his shirt collarless and his boots unshined. He limped away, pushing his cart filled with brown grocery bags across Bourbon Street, looking back at Dugas with genuine fear.

When he tried to get the cart up on the banquette, what other American cities call a sidewalk, it almost tipped over and Dugas went to help.

"I got it," the man said, tugging the cart toward the iron gate of a schoolhouse. Three stories, the schoolhouse was brown brick with windows covering the front façade and seven concrete steps leading to a large arched doorway, a bas-relief with a crucifix above the doorway and the name, St. Louis School.

"Oh, no!" The man stumbled to his left and went down on his knees, gently scooping something furry from the grass of the small yard in front of the schoolhouse. Dugas stepped closer and saw it was a dead kitten, snow white like a woman's powder puff. The man began crying and Dugas looked back down the street at two of the boys who had taunted the man and pointed at them. The boys raised their fists and slapped their biceps.

A noise turned Dugas back to the school. A nun was hurring down the steps, calling, "Eugene! What's the matter, Eugene?"

The big man showed her the kitten, and she examined it and said it was probably the big brown dog she'd been seeing. "Go get the shovel," she told him, then she seemed to notice Dugas for the first time.

"I'm Detective Dugas." He opened the coat of his gray suit to show his badge. "Is he all right?"

The nun's small face peeked out from her black and white habit, her arms folded, hands inside her long sleeves. She introduced herself as Sister Catherine. Dugas told her about the boys, and she said it was a common occurrence.

"He's such a gentle soul," she said, as Eugene came around from the side of the school with a small shovel and went down on his knees again next to a camellia bush, where he buried the kitten.

Dugas asked the sister if she'd heard about the murders, and she nodded and said only what she'd seen in the papers. He thought of trying to ask Eugene. Gentle souls had a way of seeing things when others weren't paying attention, but the big man was still blubbering, so Dugas went back down the street in search of the

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boys. Kids see everything, but these kids saw him coming and he couldn't locate any of them.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1889, 12:30 P.M.

Marie Gainne was waiting for Dugas at the Detective Bureau. Seated in one of the uncomfortable wooden chairs in the waiting area, hands clasped in her lap, Marie stared at Dugas with wide, light-brown eyes. In a gray dress, her long, dark brown hair held back by a matching gray ribbon, there was a hint of lipstick on her full lips and she was lovely, so lovely Dugas had a hard time not staring at her pretty face.

He introduced himself and she said she'd just come from the coroner's office. She was thin, stood about five-five, and looked delicate, almost fragile.

Dugas nodded.

"Your captain was kind enough to suggest you accompany me back to my mother's house. Would that be all right?"

"Of course." Dugas held open the door for her and followed her down the stairs.

"You forgot your hat." She stopped.

"I never wear one," he said. "Messes up my hair." He smiled, but her face remained stoic as they continued to the streetcar stop. He caught a whiff of her perfume, which was light and sweet. Climbing on the streetcar, Dugas paid her fare and showed the conductor his badge. Policemen, priests, and nuns did not pay for rides.

Marie thanked him as he sat on the bench next to her but not too close. She stared straight ahead as if staring into a faraway place. It wasn't until they were nearing her mother's house before she spoke. "The doctor said she didn't suffer."

Dugas agreed and wasn't about to tell her that was what the coroner usually told grieving families. He felt his heart pound when she turned to him and touched his sleeve.

"How did the . . . get into the house?"

Dugas told her about the back door's shattered frame and how he and Rathlee had nailed it shut.

"I'll go in first," he told her as he used her mother's key to open the front door, then gave the key to Marie. The house smelled musty and damp. Dugas checked each room, leaving Marie downstairs.

He found her in the living room, standing in front of the fireplace, staring into its darkness.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded and wiped her eyes with a lace handkerchief. He

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waited until she looked at him to tell her he needed to know what was missing.

"Especially what jewelry is missing."

She nodded and went back through the living room to begin a careful search of the house. In the close confines of the hall, Dugas smelled her perfume again and her closeness sent his heart racing. Pencil and paper in hand, she wrote a list of what she found missing as Dugas continued to study the scene, hoping to spot something, anything that would help.

In the shards of broken wood at the back door, he found two more strands of coarse black hair and collected them in a small envelope.

"Would you like some tea?" Marie asked as he stepped back through the hall.

"That would be nice."

He followed her into the kitchen, now filled with bright sunlight, and watched her fill the teapot with water. He tried not to stare at the light reflecting off her hair, the light caressing her cheeks. He looked down at his shoes and felt a heart-sinking feeling. This woman was far too lovely for the likes of a working-class man like him.

Seated at the kitchen table, teacups before them, Marie's lips quivered as she spoke. "I've always loved this house."

For the next half hour, she talked about her childhood in the house, how happy she'd been even after her father's heart attack. He died peacefully upstairs after a brief illness.

"Do you have any children Monsieur Dugas?"

"I'm not married."

Marie stared into his eyes for a long moment, but he could read nothing in her eyes. He tried to keep his breathing regular, though his heart stammered.

She passed a sheet of paper to him. "This is what is obviously missing. If I find anything else missing, I'll notify you." She finally took a sip of her tea and turned her head to look out the kitchen window.

The list included a cameo broach, three gold rings, one of which with a diamond, a lady's silver Swiss watch, and an undetermined amount of cash.

"Cash?"

"My mother kept money in a box on the fireplace mantel in the living room."

The box he'd found with the torn corner of the five-dollar bill.

"How much money usually?"

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"Never more than one hundred dollars. Usually half that amount."

Dugas finished his tea and told Marie he could send someone to fix the back door. "There's a locksmith a few blocks from here. I'll send the locksmith directly."

Marie thanked him and said she would begin straightening up now. She sighed and brushed a loose strand of hair from her eye. "Whoever did this won't return. He got what he was after." Then she smiled shyly. "But I would appreciate having the door fixed promptly."

At the locksmith's Dugas expressed the urgency, insisting on a heavy door, and followed the locksmith back to the Gainne house before resuming his canvass of the neighborhood. He particularly sought out children to speak with. Although few would have been awake at the time of the murder, children saw things adults didn't notice.

He managed to speak with over a dozen kids, mostly Italians, but some American kids. None could shed any light on the mystery.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1889, 9:30 P.M.

Stretching out in bed, Dugas felt the weariness in his legs. Too much walking. His eyes were so tired he could barely keep them open. He pictured Marie again and daydreamed of walking with her through the oaks of City Park, a gentle breeze flowing over them. He felt sleep dragging at him and let it have its way. He dreamed, but not of Marie, nor even the killer, but the lake and the bright-blue-eyed girl he'd flirted with at the Mandeville Inn.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1889, 4:05 A.M.

A persistent knocking at his front door dragged Dugas from bed. Rathlee, gas lamp in hand, stepped back as Dugas opened the door and said, "There's been another murder!"

The fog had slithered in from Lake Pontchartrain to cover the entire city. Following Rathlee, Dugas realized they could not see but a few feet in either direction, street lamps glowing like dwarf stars at the corners.

The body of sixty-year-old Roberto Lanoria lay on the roof of his townhouse on Esplanade Avenue, three blocks from where the murderer of Eloise Gainne had shimmied down a balcony. Lanoria, dressed in a white nightshirt, lay sprawled on his back, arms and legs aspread. Stretched out he was at least six feet tall and thin, couldn't have weighed one sixty.

Standing on the flat roof of the three story townhouse, Dugas

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could still hear the shrill voice of Lanoria's housekeeper, a portly woman in her sixties, as she explained to Rathlee, for the third time, how she'd heard a crash and found a gorilla lumbering down the hall of the townhouse.

The gorilla brushed her aside, knocking her out. It was the cop on the beat, Patrick John Doran again, who found the body on the roof. He found the killer's footprints on his own this time and brought Dugas to the roof's edge where the gorilla had climbed down the front balconies of the Lanoria house to the street.

Entry was the back door. The house was ransacked. A quick examination of Lanoria's body revealed wicked bruising on the throat. For the next four hours, as the sun slowly burned away the fog, Dugas worked as if in a fog, interviewing witnesses along the avenue who swore they'd seen the gorilla. Their frightened voices echoed off the familiar balconies of the Quarter as they described a superhuman creature that preyed upon them.

Dugas even found a witness down Esplanade who claimed to have seen the gorilla swinging through the oaks along the neutral ground, flipping from tree to tree on its way toward Rampart Street. Another witness swore the gorilla ran past him up Burgundy Street. The face was hideous, described as a slobbering monster with huge teeth and red, maniacal eyes. An elderly physician explained to a throng of people standing along Esplanade that it was most likely a lycanthrope, like a werewolf. It was a were-gorilla, a man who could change into a gorilla, acquiring great strength, "simian power."

"Well," Rathlee concluded as he and Dugas stood along Esplanade, away from the crowd, "this time he killed a man. And a Wop to boot."

"Roberto Lanoria was of Spanish descent," Dugas corrected Rathlee. "Didn't you notice the books in his library and the family crest on the wall?"

Rathlee shook his head. "One dago's the same as another. If it's our boy Sal-the-Finger, then he has a gorilla as an accomplice or he's in disguise."

Dugas's eyes narrowed. "Do you really believe that?"

"Don't know what to believe. What do you think?"

"I think," Dugas concluded, "it's too early to draw conclusions."

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1889, 12:10 P.M.

While a host of determined detectives and a gaggle of frenzied newspapermen raced around the French Quarter in pursuit of a gorilla, Rathlee slipped away to continue his search for the elusive

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Salvatore Pozzolo, and Dugas slipped into the public library.

For the next two hours, Dugas researched gorillas and orangutans and the more he learned, the more convinced he became that the killer was no gorilla, or even an orang.

Certainly a silverback gorilla could be violent if provoked. Most animals would qualify there. Orangs were the gentlest of creatures; while baboons and chimpanzees were known for their predatory skills, gorillas were vegetarians.

The library confirmed Dugas's conviction. They were looking for a human, probably in disguise. His next steps led to costume shops.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1889, 6:15 P.M.

Sal-the-Finger Pozzolo sat in a hardwood chair in a rear room of the Detective Bureau. Both lips bleeding and swollen, his left eye closed shut, the small man seemed to have trouble breathing as two bull detectives hovered over him, saps in hand. Joe Rathlee sat in a chair facing Pozzolo and looked up as Dugas entered and asked him to please step out.

As soon as Rathlee joined him in the hall, Dugas said, "You know he's not our killer!"

Rathlee took in a deep breath and said, "He's too puny. I know." He lowered his voice. "He's with The Black Hand, Jacques." It was the first time he'd used Dugas's Christian name. "A dedicated criminal. I was hoping he could shed some light on this." Rathlee let out a long, weary breath.

La Mano Negro—The Black Hand. Dugas knew of those lawless Sicilians who preyed upon their brethren, leeching off innocent Sicilians who thought they had no one to turn to for protection.

"And what have you learned from this gangster?" Dugas asked.

Rathlee stared Dugas in the eye. "If I didn't like you, Monsieur le Detective, I'd kick your Johnny Crapaud ass down this hall. But me mother raised no fool." He put a friendly hand on Dugas's shoulder. "I know you're as smart as the captain says. Smarter than me, even if you are a rookie."

Rathlee withdrew his hand and looked over his shoulder. "We've nothing on Sal-the-Finger except an extradition order. We're sending him back to Italy." He shrugged. "That's all we can do."

He returned to the back room, and Dugas went back up the hall to the squad room, still surprised that Captain Gray had said that about him. He blinked twice to make sure, but it was Marie Gainne standing at the railing at the front of the Detective Bureau.

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She wore a deep burgundy dress, a lace shawl over her hair, and stared intently at Dugas as he approached.

"Are you all right, mademoiselle?"

"Yes. I came to inquire if there has been any progress on the case. People have been up and down my street all day."

Dugas looked down at his dusty shoes. "No," he told her. "No progress." He looked up. "If I promise to keep you advised, will you stay off the streets at night?" As soon as he spoke he wanted to pull the words back in.

To his surprise, Marie did not recoil or tell him he was too forward. Instead she tilted her head to the side and stared deeply into his eyes.

Several awkward heartbeats later, Dugas asked, "Will you allow me to escort you home?"

Marie nodded.

On their way out Dugas asked if she would join him for supper.

"I do not wish to . . . socialize, monsieur."

Dugas opened the door for her. "It's not socializing, mademoiselle. I've eaten nothing all day and I'm famished."

When she looked into his eyes again, he tried a smile. "I don't know if I can make it all the way to Barracks Street without nourishment."

She almost smiled.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1889, 7:00 P.M.

"*Signore policia!*" Mama Lena called out with a welcoming smile as Dugas led Marie into the small café. She ushered them to a rear table.

"Eat here often?" Marie asked as Dugas held her chair for her.

"Once. The day before yesterday. It was so good I keep craving it."

Mama Lena insisted they try the lasagna she'd just prepared, bringing a steaming loaf of Italian bread and a tin of fresh butter, a bottle of Chianti, and small salads covered with creamy Italian dressing.

Marie picked at her salad, as Dugas tried not to eat too quickly in front of her, but his stomach wanted more.

"The costumes," he told her as their lasagna arrived. "They seem too bulky and I could barely see through the masks."

"Do you really think it is a man in costume?"

It was then Dugas told her about the strands of hair. Real hair. Not the clothlike fur found on costumes.

"We have to check all possibilities," he told her. "I do, however, believe we are dealing with a man. A gorilla or any other ape is highly unlikely."

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Marie took her first bite of lasagna and nodded to him. He smiled and inquired if the new door was satisfactory. She said it was, then told him she would be returning to her classes soon.

"I will graduate in June," Marie said. "And I have a position waiting."

"Position?"

"At Ursuline Academy. Teaching."

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1889, 9:00 A.M.

Dugas met Rathlee for breakfast, this time at the small café outside Hotel Rousse and watched the burly Irishman stuff himself again. Dugas nibbled a croissant as Rathlee explained how the bulls were on a big roundup of every large, violent man known to the police.

Dugas looked at the newspapers he'd just bought. They were filled with stories of the gorilla murderer. A grotesque drawing of a huge slathering fiend took up half the front page of *L'Abeille.* The *Gazette's* front page featured four stories about the case. The voices of newspaper boys echoed from the street outside in harsh Yankee English and excitable French. "Murder! *Mort!* Gorilla! *Gorille!* Monster! *Monstre!*"

Dugas continued to canvass the area around the murders. Someone had to know something. Until a policeman asked the right questions of the right person, the answer would remain hidden. From experience as a patrol officer, Dugas knew this.

Four hours into his renewed canvass, Dugas spotted another group of Italian kids harassing the man Eugene from St. Louis School. This time Eugene was walking along the banquette, kids following him in the street, taunting him, calling out in Italian, *"Scimmia! Buffone! Babbuino!"*

Dugas started after the kids but slowed as he watched Eugene hurry away. A big man with no visible neck, Eugene was wide at the shoulders, walking hunched forward, long arms swinging, almost touching the banquette and for a moment looked . . . simian in his gait. No hat today, Eugene's dark hair stood out in knots.

A moment later Dugas realized what they were calling him. *Scimmia* and *buffone* meant monkey; *babbuino* meant baboon in Italian.

Increasing his pace, Dugas was spotted by the kids who ran off. Keeping behind Eugene, he followed the man to St. Louis School and went in after him. He explained to Sister Catherine how the big man had been taunted by children again.

She nodded. "Eugene understands it is just the cruelty of youth."

"Where does he stay?"

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Sister Catherine sat on the bench in the hall and Dugas sat next to her as she explained that Eugene lived in back in what once was the slave quarters, upstairs in an attic room at the rear of the school's property.

"His name is Eugene Maki, and he was born with his obvious deformities." She told him Eugene was raised by the Ursuline sisters in their convent, living in a storeroom until they sent him to St. Louis School to be educated. He stayed on as a helper.

"He is quite strong and a hard worker and the gentlest of souls. Loves kittens and puppies." Sister Catherine rose. "It is good of you to keep an eye out for him, but he knows those children mean no harm."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-nine or thirty."

When Dugas left, he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that wouldn't go away, not even after filling up with his aunt's jambalaya and chicken gumbo.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1889, 11:10 P.M.

It came to Dugas as he drifted to sleep, a vision of the killer lumbering down a narrow street, long arms swinging as he moved, red eyes beneath a hooded brow. The killer came directly for Dugas, its eyes glimmering. It lifted its head and it was Eugene Maki.

Dugas sat bolt upright in bed, the vision so real he felt his heart pounding.

Sometimes, he thought, the solution is too obvious to be seen clearly. "He's quite strong," Sister Catherine had said of Eugene. She had used the word "obvious" also.

Dugas dressed quickly, slipping his weapon into its holster and the extra ammo pouch in his coat pocket. He took a lantern and headed along the foggy streets back to the Quarter. The cool, misty fog brushed his face, sending a chill through him.

As he moved, he searched for a man on the beat, hoping he could spot a pale blue bowler, but only saw a black cat scurrying away. He almost smiled nervously, thinking of his favorite writer, Edgar Allan Poe, again, and increased his pace until he was running.

Panting as he arrived at the school gate, Dugas raised his lamp and looked around the small front yard and then up at the top of the building. As he took a moment to catch his breath, he contemplated waking the sisters or just going in back for Eugene.

Stepping through the gate, he spotted the small grave next to the camellia bush. Raising the lamp as he continued, he saw another grave around the side of a bush, then another, and another.

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He found a shovel in a small storage shed aside the main school building. There were six graves. He didn't bother with the first, which he knew contained the snow white kitten; he started with the rearmost grave, which looked the freshest. He found the bodies of two more kittens in two of the graves, and in the remaining graves he found oilskins filled with jewelry and watches.

In one he found the cameo broach, the three gold rings, including the one with a diamond, and a lady's silver Swiss watch, exactly as Marie had described.

His hands trembling, he hid the oilskins in the storage shed where he'd found the shovel and withdrew his revolver as he crossed the small playground for the three story narrow building at the rear of the property. Sister said Eugene lived in back in the attic. Lifting his lamp as he moved to the stairs, he saw narrow classrooms along the first and second floors. There were no windows along the third floor and a lone door at the rear of the building.

He froze as the stairs squeaked loudly, gulping before continuing. Arriving at the door, Dugas pressed his ear against it and listened. Nothing. Putting down his lantern, he tried the knob and it twisted without noise. He let the door fall open, pointing his revolver at the opening.

Slowly, Dugas lifted his lamp and reached forward, letting the light into the room. It measured about twelve feet square, a small cot in one corner, a small chifforobe in another, one wooden chair next to a table with a unlit lamp atop. Beyond the chifforobe was a door. Dugas put his lantern on the small table and tried the door. Locked.

The room smelled like old leather, musty and stale. Dugas quickly searched the chifforobe, finding men's clothes only. Moving to search beneath the cot, he spotted rungs on the wall next to the open doorway. He moved his lantern around and saw the rungs led to an opening on the roof. He could see the dark sky and a sliver of fog moving across the opening.

Carefully reholstering his weapon, lantern in his left hand, Dugas climbed the rungs to the roof. Peeking out at the roof, Dugas could see nothing in the fog, so he raised the lantern and placed it on the roof next to the open door, which was more like a hatch, then he scampered out quickly, moving away from the light as he withdrew his weapon. He could feel perspiration working its way down the sides of his face, like cool water rolling down his cheeks in the night air.

The fog was so thick he could barely see three feet in any

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direction. Lifting the lantern, he moved around the roof in ever-widening circles. Coming upon a brick chimney, he reached up and carefully placed the lantern atop and stepped away from it, letting the light bathe the area.

In the distance he could hear the foghorn from a ship along the river. Only the bravest or most foolish would tempt the Mississippi on a night like this. Leaning a hand against the chimney to peer around it, Dugas felt a brick move. He pulled the brick away and found another oilskin.

Inside he found paper money, a great deal of money, including a torn five dollar bill. Looking around, Dugas pulled the envelope from his pocket and the piece of bill inside. He held the five dollar bill next to it. A perfect match.

He slipped the bill and fragment back into its envelope and shoved the oilskin with the money back into the hole, replacing the brick and stepping away just as he heard a scraping.

He froze and bent his knees slightly, extending his weapon and cocking it. The scraping turned him around and back again. Dugas could not determine its direction, so he slowly pulled back out of the halo of light from the lantern.

Part of his brain told him to leave, to hurry down the ladder and raise the alarm. The killer was loose along the rooftops. But he could not move, especially when he heard another noise, a clumping sound.

Something moved beyond the lantern's light, something large, something hulking. Slowly, Eugene Maki stepped into the foggy light. Bent forward, huge arms swinging as he moved in a rolling gait, his red eyes leered directly at Dugas. Maki's labored breathing sounded like a growl as he came around the chimney.

"Halt in the name of the law!"

Maki's mouth opened, his arms rose, and he bellowed in a primal howl that sent Dugas reeling. The big man rushed forward, and Dugas felt his revolver jump and jump again as he fired. He saw the bullets strike Maki's chest but the big man kept coming.

Dugas fired two more times, his fifth round striking Maki's throat. The big man staggered and tilted to his left toward the roof's edge. Catching himself, Maki snapped his hideous mouth at Dugas like a wild dog and lunged again.

The revolver's final round struck Maki in the forehead and he stumbled, rolled to the left, and tumbled from the roof. With shaking hands, Dugas managed to reload his revolver before moving to the roof's edge.

He waited for a breath of air to momentarily clear away the fog,

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but when the air came, it was still too thick to see. Dugas shoved his revolver back into its holster and grabbed the lantern and tried his best not to fall on his way down the makeshift ladder.

He fell from three feet up and twisted his right ankle on the floor, but hurried out of Maki's room to the stairs and down, revolver back in hand. Several lanterns danced across the playground, moving toward him as he reached the ground.

Maki lay on his back, legs and long arms spread open. Dugas stood over the body, revolver pointing at Maki's head as he studied the face, now flaccid in death; his eyes were partially open beneath a hooded brow. Maki was dressed in all black, his hair as black as sackcloth and standing out thick and coarse.

Sister Catherine raced up. She looked from Dugas to Maki, then went down on her knees next to the man she'd described as "the gentlest of souls" and checked him. Dugas watched her touching Maki's large hands, hands that had cupped the small white kitten so gently, hands that had wrung the necks of at least three people. Gentle soul and monster in one.

She rose slowly and looked at Dugas with vacant eyes. "He's dead."

Dugas holstered his weapon and asked if one of the other sisters who had followed Sister Catherine could call out on the street for the man on the beat.

"Why did you do this?" Sister Catherine asked with a voice that cracked.

Dugas nodded to the body. "That, sister, was the gorilla murderer."

He could see she did not believe him. She might, however, when he explained. But for the moment, Dugas just stared at the body of the first man he'd ever killed, a hollow feeling in his belly. He'd often wondered what he would do, if he could kill. Now he knew.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1889, 10:30 A.M.

"Are you certain it was he?" Marie asked. She sat across the small table in her mother's kitchen. Dressed in a dark green dress, her dark hair pulled back with gold barrettes, those light brown eyes shining at him.

Dugas nodded and opened the small briefcase he'd brought, pulling out Eliose Gainne's jewelry, placing it on the table, next to his teacup.

Marie put a hand over her mouth.

The envelope was next and he told her of finding the torn piece and then finding the bill.

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"Then it is over."

Dugas nodded again and lifted his teacup for a sip.

Marie looked into her cup and sighed. "I want you to keep it," she told him, pointing to the torn bill. "As a reminder of how you put the pieces together and stopped this terrible . . ."

They drank their tea in the ensuing silence.

Marie asked. "Was there another victim lying on yet another roof?"

"We are still checking the neighborhoods but it does not appear so."

"Good."

As they finished their tea, Marie told him she was packing to return to school the following day.

Looking her in the eye, Dugas asked her to have dinner with him that evening.

She hesitated and he said, "This time it will be socializing."

She smiled and he smiled back. Outside a mockingbird added its typical fussing tirade of calls and the two turned toward the window and listened as the calls went on and on.

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER
by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

RC MDB DGCJDUUP ZJRCO D WRGO DNO. R CFXJEFC RC MDB D BFDVO CFDC DC CFO OWH XL CFO WREFC R'H FDKO CX CFAXM RC RW CFO UDTO.

—BCOKO ARCGFRO

CIPHER: _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 235

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NUMBERS

SCOTT MACKAY

The new neighbor Miguel was poking around his pickup truck in the driveway, so Andy, looking for an excuse to talk to the guy, took some garbage out to the cans at the side of the house. Miguel had the hood up. The truck was running. Andy walked over and looked under the hood with Miguel.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"It wouldn't start this morning," said Miguel, lisping. "Now it's running fine. I can't figure it out."

Every time Miguel spoke, Andy heard a little whistle because of Miguel's broken front tooth.

"You should get that tooth fixed," said Andy. "When I went for my crown, the V.A. paid for the whole cost. They'll look after you."

"Are you here every day?" asked Miguel. "Do you have a job? Or are you retired?"

"I'm retired," said Andy.

"So you're here most of the time," said Miguel.

"Most of the time."

"Do you ever go on holiday?" asked Miguel.

"Three weeks in Manzanillo," said Andy. "I go with Skip and a few other guys. Remember I was telling you about Skip?"

"The guy who lost his arm?"

"Yeah."

"So are you going on holiday soon?" asked Miguel.

"No," said Andy. "We always go in spring."

Miguel motioned at his truck. "You know what it was with the tanks in the Gulf?" said Miguel. "It was the sand. You always knew it was the sand. With this, who knows?"

"What line of work are you in anyway?" asked Andy. "I've been meaning to ask you."

"I work in the Valley," said Miguel. "The mechanics got the sand out and the tanks worked fine. But I don't think there's any sand in my truck."

Andy thought how now might be the time to tell Miguel about

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the bridge, since he was talking about the tanks in the Gulf. He'd been itching to tell Miguel about the bridge for the last two weeks, ever since he found out Miguel was Army. But on second thought, he wasn't sure now was the right time after all. Miguel, the way he kept looking out to the street, seemed too concerned about other things right now. When Andy told the story about the bridge, he wanted Miguel's undivided attention. Padre and Hornby deserved that.

"You didn't see anyone come up my driveway last night, did you?" asked Miguel.

Andy's eyes narrowed.

"No." The notion unsettled Andy. "Why?"

"Just, like . . . you know . . . if you see anyone around my house . . . or around my truck . . . that's a brand-new truck. I figure if you're here . . . and . . . if like . . . you see someone . . ."

"Sure," said Andy. "I'll keep an eye on things for you. You must spend a lot of time in the Valley."

"Especially keep an eye on my truck," said Miguel.

"I will," said Andy.

"I'd hate to see them scratch it," said Miguel.

"Who'd do that?"

"Who knows?"

"You got people mad at you?" asked Andy.

"I put a lot of work into that finish," said Miguel. "You see me waxing it on Saturday?"

Andy nodded. "You were out here all afternoon," he said.

"It took me a long time to get that finish to look like that," said Miguel. "I'd hate someone to take their keys to it."

"You think they might do that?" asked Andy.

"They might," said Miguel.

"Why don't you talk to them?" suggested Andy.

Miguel stared at the engine. "Because they're not the kind of guys you can talk to."

Andy met Skip at the Seashore Bar and Grill the next day. Skip had his hair in a ponytail.

"Did you ask him why someone wanted to scratch his truck?" asked Skip.

"Yeah," said Andy.

"And what did he say?"

"He wouldn't give me a straight answer."

Skip took a drag on his cigarette and tapped the ash into the ashtray.

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"So he drove a tank," said Skip.

"Yeah," said Andy.

"Those desert tanks must have been something. Not like the ones we had in Nam."

"He said it was the sand. Whenever there was a problem, all the mechanics had to do was get the sand out, and the tanks started working fine again."

"Have you told him about the bridge?" asked Skip.

"No."

"Why not?"

Andy frowned. "Because I can tell he's got other things on his mind right now."

"You should tell him about the bridge," said Skip. "He's Army. He could learn something."

Andy's frown deepened. "I don't see what he could learn," he said. "And 1972 was a long time ago, Skip. A young guy like him isn't going to be interested in the bridge."

Skip leaned forward. "The bridge happened in 1971, buddy," he said.

Andy's eyes widened. "1971?" he said.

"That's right," said Skip.

"No," said Andy. "It was 1972."

Skip sighed, a flicker of impatience coming to his eyes. "Look . . . Kim and Jason got married in 1971. Right?"

"No," said Andy. "They got married in 1972. The same year as the bridge."

"Buddy, you're misremembering. I think I know when the bridge happened." Skip lifted the prosthetic hook that now served as his hand. "I lost my arm there."

Andy's face stiffened. He knew he was getting older, and he realized he could be wrong about certain dates, but something as important as the bridge he wasn't going to be wrong about.

"Come over to my house and look at my discharge papers," he said. "It says right on 'em, 1972."

"We got discharged in 1971, Andy. I know that for a fact."

Andy shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "You know how I remember?"

"How?" asked Skip.

"Because we were using DMT-30s to set the charges on the bridge," said Andy. "Right?"

"Right," said Skip.

Andy grinned. "And Battalion didn't come out with those until 1972."

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"No," said Skip, his face settling. "The DMT-30s came out in 1971. The bridge happened the same year." He sat back, his beer belly expansive under his striped shirt, an exasperated smile on his face. "Andy, the bridge is the bridge. It's burned into my brain. I'm not about to forget what year it happened in." Skip took an irritated drag on his cigarette, then stubbed it out in the ashtray. "I wish Hornby was here. He'd tell you the same thing. The bridge happened in 1971."

"It happened in 1972," said Andy.

"Hornby never got his dates wrong," said Skip. Then, as if he were throwing down the gauntlet, he added, "And he never got his numbers wrong either."

Andy's face reddened. "I thought we agreed we were never going to talk about the numbers again."

"All I'm saying is that Hornby never got his numbers wrong," said Skip.

"I didn't get my numbers wrong that day either," said Andy. "I had my numbers right. I was careful with my numbers."

"I wish Hornby was here," said Skip.

"Skip, the bridge happened in 1972," said Andy.

But Skip changed the subject, as if he were now making an effort to get the night back on track. "So this guy drove a tank in the Gulf War," he said.

Andy frowned. "Skip, just look at my discharge papers and you'll see I'm right." He felt desperate.

Skip shrugged. "So it's a new truck he owns?" he said. "Or did he buy it secondhand? And why's he so squirrelly about the finish? That seems a little weird to me."

Andy sat in his kitchen drinking rye. He was on his second glass. That would be it. He never drank more than two. He was sipping slowly, wondering which box in the basement his discharge papers were in, when Kiska, his sixteen-year-old Alaskan husky, got up from her spot against the wall, walked over to her water bowl, and drank. Alex was thinking it was time to give Kiska her pill. But then he heard a car pull up out front. He listened to the car idle by the curb. He checked the clock on the stove: two o'clock in the morning. He got up and turned off the light. He looked out the kitchen window.

A black BMW with gold hubcaps purred by the curb. The radio was turned up loud; he heard the bass track thump like a heartbeat from inside the car. The radio stopped and the engine died. A young Hispanic dude in a black shirt and black Levi's got out.

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He walked up the drive and looked at Miguel's house, his face set, his eyes cautious, like he was actually sneaking up on Miguel's house.

He stopped when Andy's motion-sensitive floodlights came on. The Hispanic dude stared at Andy's house, looking pissed off at the floodlights, as if the floodlights had been disrespectful. Was this the guy who was going to scratch Miguel's truck, Andy wondered? Andy memorized the guy's features: a round face, curly dark hair, bulgy eyes, a well-built iron-pumper's body. The Hispanic dude finished looking at Andy's house, then continued up the drive.

Andy moved to the side window. The Hispanic dude walked to Miguel's side door and knocked. The knock was loud. Andy didn't like that knock. That knock was so loud it might wake the neighbors.

He left the kitchen window, went out the front door, and walked up the drive.

"Hey!" he called. The man stopped knocking and turned. "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for Miguel," he said.

"Miguel's not here," said Andy. "You're waking up the neighbors."

"Go back to bed," said the Hispanic dude. "This is none of your business."

Andy didn't like the sound of that.

"Look, come back tomorrow," said Andy. "Why do you come so late? You're waking up my neighbors."

The Hispanic dude made a face. "I *said* it was none of your business." He turned around and banged even louder. "Miguel, open up. Come on, we got to talk."

"Keep it down," said Andy.

The Hispanic dude ignored him. He banged the door again.

"Miguel, open up. I want my money."

"He's not home," said Andy.

"So if he's not home, where is he? Did he tell you where he went? I have to talk to him."

"Look, is there a message?" asked Andy.

"I have to talk to him."

Off in the Valley, he heard thunder. Kiska came down the steps onto the drive, her old legs barely managing the descent. Out on the street the wind started blowing. The Hispanic dude banged Miguel's door a fourth time.

"Miguel, open up. I want my money."

"Hey, stop that!" said Andy.

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The Hispanic dude whirled around. "You tell him I'm going to mess him up bad if he don't pay up soon."

With that, he walked down the driveway, got back into his car, and squealed out with a roar.

Andy found Miguel the next day in his garage putting up a girly calendar. Andy was glad to see they had similar tastes when it came to calendars. It meant they had something more in common than just the army.

"So he said he'd mess me up bad?" said Miguel.

"That's what he said," said Andy.

Miguel squinted. "What kind of car was he driving?" he asked.

"A black BMW," said Andy.

Miguel squinted a bit more. "Did he have a gun?"

"I don't know."

This sudden mention of a gun disturbed Andy. He hadn't been thinking about guns. It changed the whole complexion of the thing, especially because the Hispanic guy looked like the kind of guy who might carry a gun.

Miguel shook his head. "These young guys, they don't care," he said. "They don't care at all."

"The guy was making a racket," said Andy. "I went outside and told him to stop. This is a nice neighborhood. I didn't want him waking the neighbors."

"He doesn't care about stuff like that."

"Mrs. Suarez has a heart condition, and Phuong has two small children. The guy should be more considerate."

"These young guys, they don't care," said Miguel. "Like that young guy in Iraq I was telling you about. He nailed five of us before we finally got him. He had no respect for life at all."

"Sounds just like the bridge," said Andy. "Remember I was telling you about the bridge?"

He thought now might be the time to tell Miguel about the bridge. But Miguel was staring off into space.

"Young guys," he said. "They'd just as soon shoot you in cold blood than say hello to you."

Though Miguel was trying to hide it, Andy could tell he was scared. Scared the way people got scared when they thought someone was going to kill them. It probably wasn't the best time to tell him about the bridge, so he decided to put it off again. The way Miguel was staring off into space like that, Andy thought it was probably the worst time of all.

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Andy climbed the ladder and mounted the security camera. He attached the feeds, stapled them to the clapboard siding, then drilled a hole through the concrete foundation with a half-inch bit and fed the wires through into his house. Damned if he was going to let some young dude shoot Miguel. Sometimes you had to go the extra mile to save a soldier's life. He went down to the basement and pulled the wires the rest of the way through. He got the feeds hooked up to the video monitor and put a twelve-hour tape into the VCR. He wanted the dude on tape the next time he came by.

He switched the unit on. The screen flickered. He got a good view of the driveway. Cars went by out on the road. His old brown Buick baked in the sun, his BORN IN THE USA bumper sticker now nearly peeled off, the raccoon tail around his antenna looking a little worse for wear from all the trips down to Manzanillo. He fooled with the focus to get a sharper picture. He zoomed out, getting a wider view of the driveway. Miguel's truck was gone. He heard Kiska's claws clicking on the basement floor. He turned. Kiska walked towards him, the corners of her eyes filled with eye snot. She looked at the screen.

"You see this, Kiska?" he said, pointing to the monitor. "I got this hooked up to a camera outside. This is the driveway. That's Mrs. Suarez's house across the street. Remember you used to pee on the grass there? She hated that, didn't she?" He patted her in fond reminiscence. "And over there is Phuong's house. She's Vietnamese. She's actually from Hanoi, but I don't let that bother me anymore because I've learned to let bygones be bygones. Any time you want to come and look at this, go right ahead. I know you don't get out much anymore. You can bark if you see someone coming up the drive. Especially if it's that Hispanic guy. It'll be just like old times. But don't tire yourself out too much. I don't want you getting that infection again."

Kiska stood there panting. She was looking at him in that way she had, like she knew all, saw all. He realized he wasn't fooling her in the least. She was making him feel guilty. He took a napkin out of his pocket and wiped her eyes.

"Don't look at me that way, Kiska," he said. "Believe me, I know I shouldn't have spent all that money. But I had to. We'll just have to tighten our belts. Miguel is Army, and we have to do what we can for him. I got the camera cheap, and the monitor was only a hundred bucks. And this old VCR I found at a garage sale. The guy I got the gun from was selling them out of the back of his pickup truck by the freeway for only twenty-five bucks. So it wasn't

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much, not really. All totaled, a month's worth of groceries at most."

Or all their gas money to Manzanillo. He knew he still wasn't fooling her. She could sniff out guilt the way a coon dog could sniff out a coon.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I gave Miguel a thousand bucks. But you heard what that Hispanic dude said? He was going to mess Miguel up bad if Miguel didn't pay him. And when Miguel started talking about the guy's gun, what else was I supposed to do? We had a little extra, so I gave it to him. Miguel's military. We can't let some young punk shoot him. If that means no Manzanillo this year, then that means no Manzanillo. It's a small price to pay to save a guy's life."

Later, when he went to bed that night, he opened the window and listened to the breeze through the palmettos. He thought of Padre. He thought of Hornby. He thought of the bridge, and of all the rain the day the bridge happened. He remembered palm trees in the monsoon, wet, green, and wind-whipped, nothing like the tinder-brown California palms down the block. He recalled all those guerillas in their black pajamas, and how they seemed to thrive in palm trees, especially when the monsoon rains came, and how, no matter how many he killed, more always came, like water through a broken dike. He thought of Padre's mother the day he told her about the bamboo stakes in the pit. He thought of Hornby's young wife the day he told her about the gunfire by the river. He remembered his commanding officer fudging the report, putting that bit in about the medevac to save his ass. All so long ago. Yet sometimes it seemed like yesterday. It kept coming back to him. Padre and Hornby, dead, never getting a chance to live their lives. He didn't want that to happen to Miguel if he could possibly avoid it.

He was just drifting off a couple hours later when he heard a car drive up outside. He thought for sure it was the Hispanic dude coming back to shoot Miguel, but when he got up to check, he saw a big blue Crown Victoria in the driveway. A man in a brown business suit got out of the car. He had a flashlight. He shone the flashlight at Miguel's house, then climbed the steps to the front door. He pulled out a set of keys, opened the front door, and went inside. Andy just stood there watching. He was glad he was getting it all on tape. He wondered if this guy had a gun too. He saw the kitchen light go on, watched the man in the business suit walk past the kitchen window, then saw the light in the back bedroom

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go on a few seconds later. For fifteen minutes, he didn't see a thing in Miguel's house, just the lights burning in the kitchen and the back bedroom. He was waiting for a gunshot, but one never came.

He wasn't going to wait all night. He was going to stop this if he could.

He got his gun from the kitchen table and stuffed it down the back of his pants. He put on his windbreaker. Who was this guy, going into Miguel's house when Miguel wasn't home? Was this another guy here to mess Miguel up, a blue-eyed Vietcong he had to protect Miguel from? Andy went outside, crossed the driveway, and climbed Miguel's front steps. Miguel's front door was open. The man in the business suit was listening to Miguel's phone messages in the front hall. The man looked up. He was so bald, his head reflected the hall light.

"Can I help you?" asked the man.

"I'm the neighbor," said Andy. "Miguel's not here. I'm keeping an eye on his place for him. Who are you?"

The man came to the porch, pulled out a police badge, and showed it to Andy.

"I'm police," he said. The detective put the badge away. "I'm afraid I got some bad news about Miguel."

Andy stared for a second. He knew what was coming. "Yeah?"

"He was murdered downtown last night," said the detective.

Andy felt suddenly out of sync with everything. It was like he was trying to remember the numbers all over again, and no matter how hard he tried, they just wouldn't come. He pictured the map, all that up-and-down terrain near Than Khe, saw the grid lines, the topographical contours, but only got a fuzzy impression of the numerical figures along the edge of the map. Learning Miguel was murdered after he'd gone to so much trouble to save the man's life made him feel like he was calling in the medevac all over again, and then watching it land in the wrong landing zone three miles away.

"Does he work downtown?" asked the detective.

It took a second for Andy to get back on track. "He works in the Valley."

"Where?"

"I don't know," said Andy. "He never told me." Andy looked past the detective's shoulder into the front hall, and he knew he had that expression of panicked disbelief on his face, like he was being shot at, his upper lip raised above his nicotine-stained teeth, his eyes squinting as if everything were too bright. "So he was murdered, huh?"

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"He mention he was in trouble of any kind?" asked the detective.

The wind was blowing again, and the palmettos shifted in the breeze. Andy swallowed.

"A Hispanic dude was here to see him last week," said Andy. Was that his voice? He sounded like he was trying to explain the numbers to his commanding officer. "He was driving a black BMW. He . . . he said Miguel owed him money."

"We think the guy who killed Miguel drove a red Mustang," said the detective. "Ever see a red Mustang parked around here?"

"No," he said.

The detective thought for a moment. He finally rubbed his chin. "We'll be doing a neighborhood canvass later this week. Maybe you could write out a statement for us. That might save some time and trouble." The detective peered down the street. "This a dead end?"

"The BMW must have been about ten years old," said Andy, wanting it to be the black BMW instead of the red Mustang, because if it wasn't the black BMW, why had he wasted all that money in the first place?

"If you could just write it down . . ."

"The guy came at two in the morning, and he was mad."

"It doesn't sound like the guy we're looking for," said the detective. "Like I say, the guy we're after drives a red Mustang. You sure you never saw a red Mustang anywhere around here?"

"Was the guy in the red Mustang Hispanic?" asked Andy. "Maybe he has two cars."

"No," said the detective. "The guy was black. Miguel always deals with black guys. Always."

"Because the dude I saw was Hispanic."

"We'll be doing a neighborhood canvass later this week," said the detective. "Write it all down." The detective looked up the street again. "So can I get out this way? Or do I have to go back the way I came?"

Andy surveyed the neighborhood, now even having trouble with the geography of his own street, never mind the hills around Than Khe.

"You got to go back," he finally said. "There's no getting through here."

Andy was too fidgety to sleep after that. Despite his best efforts—despite canceling Manzanillo for the first time in his life—he hadn't saved Miguel. Just like he hadn't saved Padre and Hornby either. He went down to the basement and looked

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through all his old boxes for his discharge papers. He had to search through eleven boxes before he finally found them.

He was shaken to see that Skip was right. His discharge date was 1971, not 1972. Which meant Kim and Jason got married in 1971. Which meant Battalion came out with the DMT-30s in 1971. Which meant the bridge had happened in 1971. He simply couldn't believe that. The bridge was a defining moment in his life. He was a different man because of the bridge. He never got married because of the bridge, never had children, couldn't find the courage in himself to make any lasting connections. His memory couldn't be trusted. Skip was right and he was wrong.

He was so badly shaken by his discharge papers, he had to sit down. Right on the basement floor. How could he have been so wrong about something so important? And if he was wrong about his discharge date, mightn't he have been wrong about the numbers all along? Maybe the medevac wasn't to blame. Maybe his CO shouldn't have fudged the report. If only the map hadn't got lost in the river in the first rifle attack. If only he hadn't been forced to remember the map numbers in his head.

Kiska came into the room and licked his hand. He knew what she was thinking. You couldn't hide anything from Kiska. She was thinking he could have saved Padre and Hornby. He was thinking the same thing himself. He wasn't stupid. But it was hard to remember anything when the Vietcong kept taking sniper shots at you while you were running in a blind panic through the jungle to a landing zone three miles away.

Andy met Skip at the Seashore Bar and Grill a few days later.

"I don't know why you gave him all that money," said Skip.

"I had to," said Andy.

"Now you can't come to Manzanillo." Skip took a long, moody drag on his cigarette. "Why a video camera? Why go to all that expense?"

"I wanted to get a picture of the Hispanic dude the next time he came by so I could give it to the police."

He was feeling better about the whole thing, now that he was sitting with Skip. Because of Miguel getting shot, he had a whole new perspective on the bridge. He needed that. He was sick of the same old uncertainty.

"But it wasn't even the Hispanic dude who killed Miguel," said Skip. "It was the black guy." He tapped the newspaper on the table. "It says right here."

"How was I supposed to know that?" asked Andy.

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Skip shook his head and stared at his drink for a while.

"Did you ever find your discharge papers?" he finally asked.

Andy looked up, perturbed that Skip should mention his discharge papers. He wanted to forget the whole thing. He didn't care if he ever talked about his discharge papers again. Or the bridge for that matter.

"No. I looked, but I couldn't find them."

Skip stared at him. He couldn't hide anything from Skip. Skip was like Kiska in that way.

"Because I was thinking about the bridge again," said Skip. "I'm sure it happened in 1971."

"No," said Andy, his voice stubborn. "It was 1972."

But did it really matter when the bridge happened? Padre was dead. Hornby was dead. And now Miguel was dead too. He had to let it go.

"And I was thinking about the medevac helicopter," said Skip.

Andy frowned. He was getting sick of these same old arguments. "I had nothing to do with that," he said.

"But it worked out conveniently for you, didn't it?" said Skip.

Andy's frown deepened. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Because the pilot took the heat for Padre and Hornby, not you."

"I had the numbers right, Skip," he said, even though he now wasn't so sure. "I gave the pilot the right coordinates. Don't blame me if he came down three miles away."

Skip sat back. "I still think the bridge happened in 1971," he said.

"No," said Andy. "It was 1972."

"I wish I could find my own discharge papers," said Skip. In the light of the window's neon beer sign, Skip's gray ponytail looked white. "I think I left them in Portland."

"It doesn't matter," said Andy. "It happened a long time ago."

"And it's too bad about Manzanillo, too," said Skip. "We're going to miss you, buddy."

"There'll always be next year," said Andy.

"I know. But we're still going to miss you. I'm going to miss you."

Andy didn't answer. He sipped his rye. His belief, his faith, his conviction in the numbers was gone. He thought of palm trees in the monsoon rains, the way the branches whipped all over the place, and the way there were always little brown men in black pajamas hiding in them, even when recon told you they were miles away. He thought of Hornby taking two rounds in the back before he fell into the river, and of having to drag him through the jungle to the medevac when the medevac was three miles away.

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He thought of finding Padre in a pit full of bamboo stakes, of pulling him out with a rope, and of watching him slowly bleed to death. You could never take enough precautions. You had to memorize the numbers in case you lost your map in the river. You had to keep track of your men. You couldn't let them wander off, not when they could fall into a pit full of bamboo stakes, or get shot in the back while taking a piss in the river. You had to expect enemy gunfire to pin your medevac helicopter down for at least an hour. You had to nail a video camera to your house, buy a cheap gun from a guy selling them from the back of a truck by the freeway, even give up your vacation to Manzanillo if it meant saving a soldier's life.

"Yeah . . . well . . . maybe the bridge happened in 1971 after all," he said.

"You see?" said Skip. "I *knew* it."

"I just want to let the bridge go," said Andy.

Skip's eyes narrowed with all the sorrowful echoes of that time. "So do I," he said.

The same old bridge, over and over again, a steel girder one built by the French some time in the 1920s, single lane, picturesque, real colonial-looking. God, yes, the bridge. Only now, at last, he could forget it. The solution was simple, really. Death was death. It didn't matter how many precautions you took. It came when you were a soldier in the field, it came at you when you were retired and living in a scrubby neighborhood in East Los Angeles. You couldn't stop it, you couldn't prevent it, it was as uncontrollable and unpredictable as the weather, and it certainly wasn't your fault when it happened to the people you loved and respected, or to the people your CO expected you to protect.

"And I'm thinking we should try someplace different than Manzanillo next year," said Andy.

Skip looked up from his drink. "Oh?" he said. "And why's that?"

Andy took a drag on his cigarette. "I just think it's time we move on," he said.

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UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING

To outsiders, Youngsburg seems the typical Midwestern town, expanding outward to accommodate its increasing population. Some of the residents are new to the town. The Rosedale subdivision has six newly built brick houses, identical except for their differently painted doors. Each couple belongs to one or more civic and social organizations, the husband has his profession (one is an editor), and the wife has a pet dog.

One of the newcomers, however, is wanted in connection with fraudulent use of the mails. To blend into the community, he and his wife joined the Music Society and the Golf Club. Then one of his neighbors, a member of one of the fugitive's organizations, spotted his likeness on a wanted poster in the Youngsburg post office and turned informer for the reward.

1. Each of the six families belongs to at least one organization. Three are members of the Parent Teachers' Association: the families headed by Lem, the clerk, and the man in the house with the white door. Mr. Burns, Peggy's husband, and the owner of the foxhound do not belong.

2. Three families are members of the local Music Society. The ladies in it are married to Jack, the baker, and the gentleman living in the house with the brown door. Mrs. Anson, Olga, and the owner of the bulldog did not join.

3. Three families belong to the Golf Club: those headed by Ike, Quilla's husband, and the man with the green door. Mr. Faxon, the artist, and the owner of the Airedale do not play golf and declined to join.

4. Gus, Hank, and Ike are (not necessarily in order) Mr. Edson, Marie's husband, and the man with the yellow door.

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5. Mr. Anson and Gus belong to the same two organizations, but the owner of the dachshund and the man with the orange door belong only to the other organization.

6. Hank, Mr. Coles, and the farmer are not married to Peggy, the owner of the collie, or the lady with the orange door.

7. The occupants of the houses with white, green, and brown doors include Karl, Nola, and the doctor.

8. Neither Nola nor the lady with the pet elkhound belong to the Parent Teachers' Association. Neither is married to the informer.

9. Mrs. Burns, Mrs. Coles, and Mrs. Dawes (who does not belong to the Music Society) include Rosie, the clerk's wife, and the lady with the red door (who did not join the Golf Club). One of their husbands is the informer.

Who informed on whom?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

We'd like to know what your favorite AHMM stories are

In anticipation of our fiftieth anniversary in 2006, we are asking our readers, especially our long-time subscribers, to tell us what stories over the years were the most memorable, captivating, enjoyable, or otherwise remarkable. We also invite you to contribute your comments about the stories you've particularly liked.

We'll print some of the stories from your suggestions as Mystery Classics during our anniversary year. We'll also run a selected list in the magazine, including some of your comments.

Please write to: The Editors
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
475 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

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DIVORCE WORK

ERNEST B. AND ALICE A. BROWN

Ignoring the stench of diesel fumes from the endless parade of semis that rumbled down Commercial Street, the August heat that shimmered off the sidewalk, and the stitch in my left side, I jogged the mile along the waterfront from the gym to my loft on Jackson Avenue. I double-timed it up the three flights of stairs, turned on the TV in the kitchen, and snaked a two-quart container of cranberry juice out of the fridge. Between gulps, I heard the Channel 6 news anchor saying, "—leaped to her death from the roof of a building on Tremont Street." I walked back to the set and turned up the sound.

They'd switched to an on-site reporter standing in front of a cordoned-off section of Tremont Street where firefighters in bulky black and yellow coats and rubber boots were hosing down the pavement. She had a hand mike with a big "6" on it held close to her mouth as she was saying, "—bounced off the roof of an SUV that was traveling down Tremont Street and into the path of an oncoming tour bus." She went on to say that from the driver's license and credit cards in the handbag they found under the bus, the police had identified the badly mangled body as Jacquelyn Richmond.

Jacquelyn's boss at the Tremont Media Research Center where she worked had declined an on-camera interview, but according to the reporter, he was overheard telling a BPD detective investigating the incident that Jackie had seemed despondent over her recent divorce from Boston real estate magnate R. A. Richmond.

Jacquelyn Richmond. I stood there staring at the TV screen with the refrigerator door and my mouth gaping open. Six months earlier, hired by the law firm that represented Mr. Richmond, I'd done the investigation of his wife that laid the groundwork for his divorce.

I was focusing so intently on the reporter in front of the camera and what she was saying that I almost missed the glimpse in the background of my old partner, Detective Sergeant Lucas Claymore, entering the building behind her.

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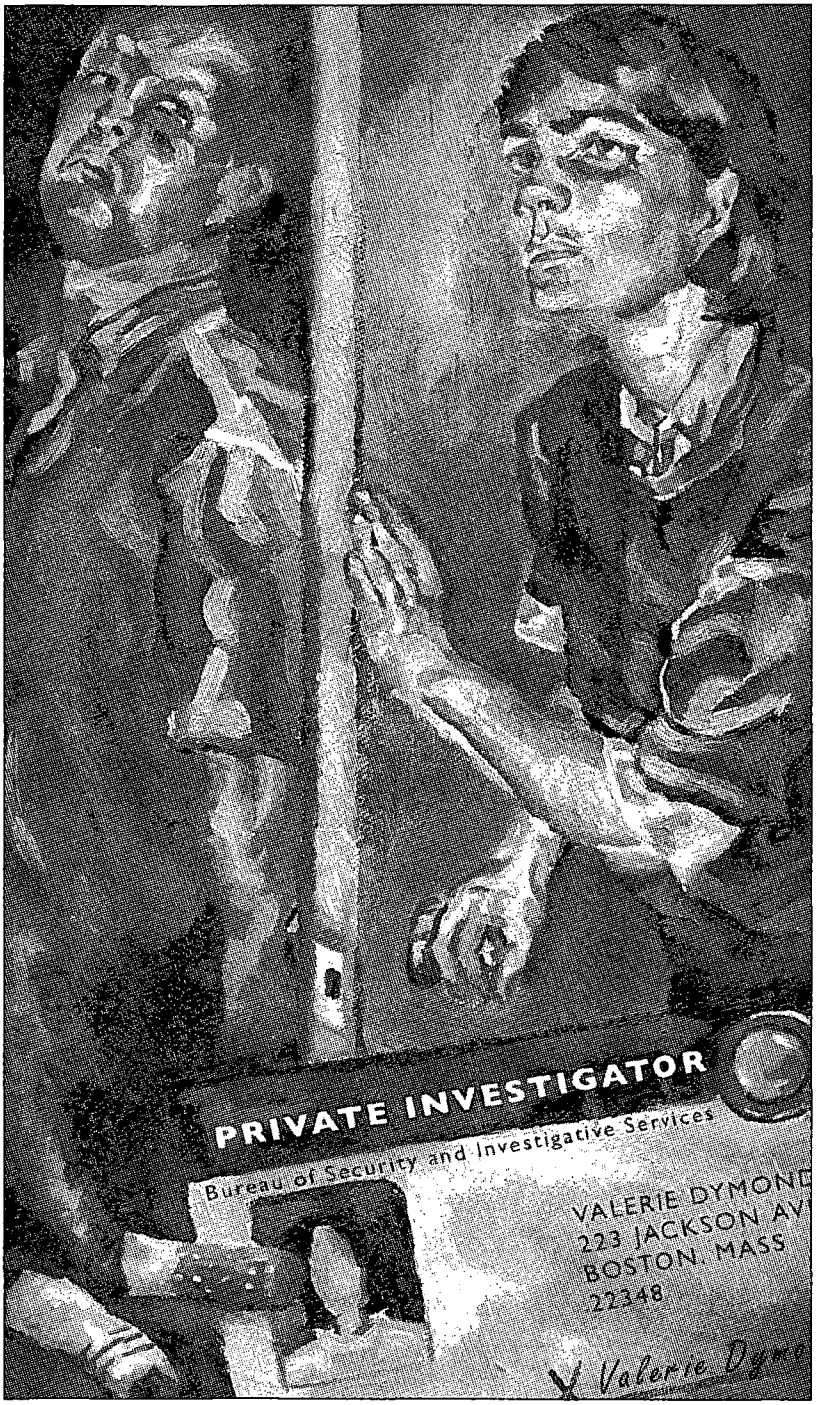

Helen Griffin

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I did a quick rinse-off at the bathroom sink, rolled on a little Ban, added a splash of Banana Republic Classic, threw on a short-sleeved white linen shirt, ran a comb through my hair, and in less than ten minutes was in my car and headed for Tremont Street.

"I don't do divorce work." A shopworn phrase inserted into countless private eye novels to let the reader know that the author's intrepid protagonist has scruples. Oh sure, Philip or Kinsey, Sharon or Lew often bend and sometimes break the law to solve their cases, but their personal code of ethics would never let them stoop to something as sleazy as collecting evidence in a divorce case. But out here in the real world, the antiquated depiction of a P.I. catching the wayward husband on film cavorting on a rumpled bed with his honey in some out-of-the-way motel is an anachronism. A concept that became as obsolete as the felt fedora and the double-breasted trench coat with the enactment of the no-fault divorce.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying there's no longer any such thing as divorce work for private investigators, because there is. But nowadays it's mostly restraining order violations, child custody cases, prenuptial agreements, and postnuptial settlements. Attorneys handle most of it. And the law firms that specialize in that sort of work use big name, high volume detective agencies with staffs of investigators who are either retired military people with degrees in business administration or ex-FBI agents with law degrees from Harvard or Yale. That's why, six months earlier, I'd nearly soiled my slacks when Jeremiah Braxton of Bradley, Braxton & Lieberwitz—one of the classier of Boston's high-class law firms—called and asked if I would be interested in doing a preliminary investigation for a divorce case they were handling.

When I'm not staying one jump ahead of the collection agencies by serving papers for lawyers who get the jitters driving their Beemers in Roxbury or a bad case of the sweats climbing the dark stairway of a triple-decker in Dorchester, I do business as V. Dymond, Private Investigator, out of the third floor loft I call home on Jackson Avenue in Boston's North End. The *V* stands for Valerie, and, please, spare me the VD wisecracks; I've heard 'em all before.

There's no lack of competition in my line of work; the Boston area phone book lists a hundred and thirty-two agencies. We may not be the biggest outfit in town—my cell phone, my camcorder, my laptop, and I—but we're always out there cranking for a buck. So when Jeremiah Braxton called and asked if I did divorce work,

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I didn't think twice before answering, "Do I do divorce work? You bet your litigious tush I do."

At the time, I was well aware that the money they were offering me—almost twice my usual fee—was too much for the job they wanted done. But somewhere between the lure of the quick buck and the vision of Bradley, Braxton & Lieberwitz added to my list of references, I'd put aside the gnawing feeling that I was being gently but firmly jerked around. Now, six months later, in the hard, cold light of hindsight, I knew damned right well I'd been had.

I left the car in the underground garage on Charles Street, cut across the Common, and crossed Tremont Street in the middle of the block. I dodged in front of a Yellow Cab and got cursed out in a colorful mix of English and some Mideastern tongue I didn't recognize. I gave the cabbie the one-finger salute, leaped to the safety of the sidewalk, and almost collided with Detective Sergeant Lucas Claymore as he came out through the glass entryway of the building that housed the Tremont Media Research Center. He gave me that crinkly eyed boyish grin that had always quickened my pulse and made me weak in the knees. "I should cite you on the spot," he said, "for that bit of jaywalking."

A lean and wiry six foot two, reddish brown hair that always looks windblown, and the bluest eyes I've ever seen; and when he turns on that grin, I swear, he could charm the socks off a mother superior.

"Hey, Luke, how you doin'?" I gave him a one-armed hug and a friendly peck on the cheek. God, he smelled good. I felt that old familiar flutter down low in my stomach.

His grin faded into a frown. "So where you headed in such a hurry?"

"Right here."

"Here?"

"Yeah, here. I just caught the tail end of the Channel 6 live-on-the-scene coverage of the jumper; I saw you in the background going into the building and thought I'd shoot over and say hello."

"Yeah, right," he said, "just stopped by to say hello." The frown deepened. "And your interest in the jumper is what?"

"A few months ago," I said, "her husband was trying to slap her with the infidelity-as-breach-of-contract clause in their prenup. The husband's lawyer hired me to tail her for a week and document the fact that she was messing around with someone else while hubby was at the office."

"Mrs. Richmond was stepping out on her husband?"

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"My report and the deposition I gave were the basis for the divorce," I said, skating around a direct answer to his question. And then to change the subject, "Where's your partner?"

"I'm working this one alone."

"How come?"

"Shorthanded. Partner's on vacation and we've got two guys out with a stomach bug that's going around, so they sent me out alone; said to call in for help if it looked like anything other than a suicide, which it doesn't."

I pointed toward the roof. "Crime Scene Unit still up there?"

"No. Not much to see or do up there, anyhow. Most of their work was down here in the street where she landed. They finished up there and took off an hour ago." He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "Just got done interviewing the people she worked with; gotta go back to the shop now and start on the paperwork."

"How about letting me go up and take a look around?"

"I can't do that, Val, it's a crime scene."

"Thought you just said it was a suicide."

"I did and it is, but trying to whack yourself is a crime."

"So you've sealed off the area?"

"No, but—"

"Come on, Luke, for old times' sake?"

For old times' sake. During my probationary period on the police force, they had partnered me up with Patrolman Lucas Claymore in a black and white out of the A-1—that's the downtown area, Beacon Hill, the North End, and Charlestown. I was fresh out of the academy and gung ho to serve and protect. And even though Lucas was a couple of years older than I was, he still had that youthful dedication to the job. We had made a good team.

I'd always had a thing for Lucas, but try as I might, he was one of that rare breed afflicted with double "M" syndrome: Married and Monogamous. A few years later, Lucas had made sergeant and moved up. He was pushing for the gold shield, and I was still a patrol officer. Fed up with the good-old-boy politics and the latent gender discrimination, I eventually quit the force and went private.

"What the hell," he said, "come on."

We took the elevator to the top floor and walked around the corner to the single flight of stairs that led to the roof. Lucas led the way, which gave me a lovely view of world-class buns in well-worn jeans and a reminder of how long I'd been celibate.

There was a chest-high parapet wall clad in copper on all four sides of the roof. The cinder block structure that housed the ele-

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vator equipment and the stairway we'd just come up out of stood in the center, and just in front of the stairwell enclosure, a rickety wooden picnic table held two heavy glass ashtrays.

"Tremont Media occupies the top floor, where we got off the elevator," Lucas said, "so the smokers come up here. It's quicker than going down to the street."

I walked over to the parapet, leaned over the top, and looked down onto the street.

People moved along the sidewalk unaware of what had happened here this morning, and the never-ending stream of traffic flowed unconcerned down Tremont Street. Jacquelyn Richmond's spectacular departure from the world had barely caused a heartbeat's blip in the rhythm of the city.

I stepped back and looked along the parapet wall in both directions. Lucas sat on the edge of the picnic table with his feet on the bench seat and watched me.

"On the news they said you found her handbag underneath the bus?"

"Yeah, the strap was torn off one end, probably ripped off her when she went under the bus, but it was lying right there alongside the body."

I circled the area and came back to the table. "Shoes, was she wearing shoes?"

"No. That is, they weren't on her feet when we found her; they were out in the middle of the street. From their location, I'd say both shoes flew off her feet when she bounced off the roof of the SUV before the bus ran over her."

"What kind of shoes?"

"Heels, black—" Lucas held his forefinger and thumb about two inches apart. "—about yea high."

I made another circle of the area. There was a trash can at the corner of the stairwell structure by the door. Behind it, just around the corner, there were three or four cigarette butts lying in a cluster on the roof.

I walked back to Lucas, hitched my butt up on the edge of the table so close to him that our shoulders were touching, and said, "Suicide, huh?"

"Looks like suicide to me. According to everyone I talked to, she'd been acting depressed ever since the divorce."

"Tell you what," I said, "I'll betcha a roast beef sandwich and a Sam Adams I can convince you she was murdered."

"Murdered! Come on, Val, you haven't—"

"What d'ya say, is it a bet?"

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He shook his head incredulously. "You're on."

"First of all, most female jumpers take off their shoes before they jump, and they hardly ever go over the side carrying their purses. They usually leave everything in a neatly stacked pile before they jump."

"Not always," he said. "Maybe she hadn't planned it, just did it spur of the moment."

I walked him over to the parapet wall. "Okay, maybe, but tell me how she managed to clamber up and over this grimy old parapet—in heels yet—without leaving so much as a scuff mark on the wall."

Lucas spent a minute or two walking back and forth along the wall, scowling at it and mumbling under his breath.

I walked to the corner of the stairwell structure, looked back at Lucas, motioned him over, and pointed to the cigarette butts. "Did you notice these?"

He shrugged. "Looks like people toss their butts behind the trash can on their way downstairs."

"I don't think so. These are all the same: no filters. And you can tell they all got here sometime *after* last night's rain."

Lucas hunkered down for a closer look and said something foul under his breath.

"During the whole week I tailed her," I said, "I never once saw Jacquelyn smoking, so unless she came up here to jump, and *I* don't think that she did, she had no reason to be up here. I think someone who smokes non-filter cigarettes arranged to meet her here, stood right there behind the corner waiting for her, and when she showed up, threw her off the roof."

Lucas stood up. He swore again, this time not under his breath. "I've gotta get the Crime Scene Unit back here—" He yanked out his cell phone and thumbed in the number. "—and you've gotta make yourself scarce."

I handed him my card. "My cell number's on there; call me when you're done here."

He gave me a scowl. "For what?"

"You owe me a Sam and a sandwich, handsome."

"You were right, Val, CSU says there's no way Jacquelyn could have climbed over that parapet wall without leaving scuff marks or scratches."

We were sitting in a back booth downstairs in Joe's American Bar and Grill on Dartmouth Street. The burble of conversation from the Newbury Street shoppers and tourists who crowded the

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place rose and fell against the background of clattering dishes and silverware, and the air hung heavy with the aroma of barbecued beef.

"And the cigarette butts were all the same—Camels, no filters—and they were definitely dropped there sometime after last night's rain. They've been bagged, tagged, and shipped to the lab for DNA analysis."

"Did anyone wonder what changed your mind about it being a suicide?" I asked around a mouthful of barbecued beef.

Lucas froze with his sandwich halfway to his mouth and looked at me sheepishly. "Yeah, they did. I told 'em I remembered having heard somewhere that female jumpers don't usually go over the side wearing their shoes and clutching their handbags, so I'd gone back up on the roof and taken a hard second look." His face reddened a little. "I know copping the credit like that was a sleazy thing to do, but there's no way I could let them know I'd taken a civilian up there."

I knew it was petty, but I was getting some sort of perverse pleasure from seeing Lucas so contrite. "Hey," I said, "no problem." I took a sip of Samuel Adams's fine Boston Lager. "What are old partners for if not to cover each other's backsides."

"When I brought up the bit about female jumpers and their shoes and bags, one of the CSU people said that that had bothered her when she was out there the first time, said she had already noted it in her first report. I'd have really looked bad if all that'd come out after I'd written it up as a probable suicide. I owe you one, Val."

I gave him my sexiest smile, the one with the half-hooded eyes. "And don't think I won't try to collect, handsome."

He shook his head and tried to scowl, but he was blushing.

"So," I said, "the working hypothesis now is it's murder?"

Lucas nodded. "We've got the where, the when, and the how, now we just need a why and a who."

"I have a couple of ideas on a 'why and a who,' " I said.

"You do?" He looked surprised. "Who?"

"Her ex-husband."

"Which one?"

It was my turn to look surprised. "There's more than one ex-husband?"

"Yeah, she'd only been divorced about a year when she married Richmond. First husband was a guy named Maxwell Bernhard. His name popped up when they did a notification-of-next-of-kin search. He's an unemployed construction worker, and it seems old

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Max has a record, too: three priors for drunk and disorderly and two for assault. You didn't know about the first husband?"

"No, I didn't."

"So when you say you have an idea about the why and the who, the *who* to who you're referring is her second ex-husband?"

"You sound like a stuttering owl, Lucas, and it's to *whom*, but yes, I was referring to Richmond."

"Just because you took night courses at UMass is no reason to get tony, and what would be the *why* for Richmond, what motive would he have had for murdering his ex-wife?"

"I'm still taking night courses at UMass, and I have no idea what Richmond's motive might have been. But I do know the whole bit about her cheating on her husband that they used me to document was a hustle."

Lucas was eyeing the remaining half of my roast beef sandwich. "You going to eat that?"

I shook my head and pushed the plate across the table.

He paused in his attack on what was left of my sandwich to waggle his empty beer bottle at our waiter and nod a yes when the waiter made the sign of the bull and mouthed, "Two?"

"So what makes you think it was a hustle?"

"First of all, when law firms like Bradley, Braxton & Lieberwitz need an outside investigator, they use one of the big name national agencies, not some little ham-and-egg outfit like mine. On top of that, they offered me double the money the job they wanted done was worth. I guess I knew when I took the case it was something they probably couldn't have gotten a reputable agency to do."

"So why did you take it?"

"Besides needing the money, you mean? I thought adding the prestigious firm of BB&L to my list of references would be a real coup. And it wasn't as though what they wanted me to do was illegal.

"They claimed their client's wife was having an illicit affair with some writer who lived on Marlborough Street, an investigative journalist named Willcox. They told me that one of the conditions of the prenup she had signed when she married Richmond stipulated that any act of infidelity on her part 'shall be grounds for divorce, and said divorce shall be free of any and all monetary and/or property claims by her on her husband.'

"All I had to do was follow Mrs. Richmond for a week, turn in a written report that documented her rendezvousing with Willcox, and a give a deposition. That was it; they said they'd

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handle everything from there."

"So you followed her for a week?"

"I did, every day for a week."

"And was she seeing this Willcox guy?"

"Yup, every day, like clockwork. The limo would show up at nine every morning. Mr. Richmond would come down the front steps, climb aboard, and they'd head out for his office. Then at ten every morning Mrs. Richmond would show. She'd come out of the house carrying a black attaché case, walk down Beacon Hill, and hike up Marlborough Street to Willcox's apartment. She'd stay until two in the afternoon when Willcox would open the front door and see her out. Then she'd walk back home, arriving an hour before the limo brought hubby home from the office."

"What do you think she had in the attaché case, her outfits from Victoria's Secret for those intimate moments?"

"That's what I thought at first, but later on, I wasn't so sure."

"But you did your report and the depo and got paid?"

"Yes."

"So what's the problem?"

"The problem is the whole setup felt so wrong that on the fifth day, after I'd followed Jacquelyn home, I went back to Marlborough Street to take another look at Willcox. And I got there just in time to see a man walk up to Willcox's door and ring the bell. Willcox came out and gave this guy a big hug and a kiss and the two of them walked off down the street holding hands."

"Willcox is gay?"

"Sure looked it to me, which raises the question: what was he doing with Jacquelyn?"

"Maybe he's a switch-hitter."

"Maybe, but any time I'd seen him come out on the steps with Jacquelyn, he never so much as shook hands with her.

"The thing is, Richmond's lawyer had made it emphatically clear that I was not to speak to anyone, make no contact with any of the parties, and do nothing but follow Mrs. Richmond for five days. I didn't want to screw up the gig, so in my report and the depo, I didn't mention going back and seeing Willcox and his friend."

"And?"

"And now I feel guilty about having been part of what I'd bet the farm was just a bucket job Richmond set up to wriggle out of paying alimony when he divorced Jacquelyn."

Lucas looked at me over the top of his glass. "Do you really feel guilty, Val, or are you just pissed that you let Richmond's lawyer run a scam on you? Besides, I don't see where any of this

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has anything to do with Jacquelyn getting tossed off the roof. I mean, what would be Richmond's motive for murdering her when he'd already gotten his divorce and aced her out of any alimony?"

Good question. "I don't know," I said. "I just can't shake the gut feeling the divorce has something to do with the murder."

Lucas looked at his watch. "And I have a gut feeling I'd better get back to the station. Max is coming in and I want to be there when they talk to him."

"You're bringing in Max what's-his-name for questioning?"

"Bernhard, Maxwell Bernhard, and we're not bringing him in, he's coming in voluntarily. He sounded pretty upset when he got the news about his ex-wife. When we said we'd like to talk to him, he said he'd be glad to come in, do whatever he could to help."

Lucas stood up, tossed a pair of twenties on the table to cover the tab, said, "Thanks again, Val, I owe you," and left me sitting there sipping Sam Adams and pondering motives—not Mr. R. A. Richmond's, but mine.

Did I really feel guilty about Richmond using me as a pawn in his phony little game of prenup violation? Or was Lucas right, was I just pissed that I'd let them run a scam on me? Or worse yet, was I really feeling guilty because for a fat fee and the chance to play in the big leagues, I'd gone along with something I knew from the start was a setup?

After contemplating my navel for a couple of minutes, I gave up and decided to go have a little chat with Mr. Willcox.

"Yes?"

Willcox had opened the door a crack and was peering out at me over the chain.

"Valerie Dymond." I held up my wallet and showed him the photostat of my P.I.'s license. "Could we talk for a couple of minutes, Mr. Willcox?"

He had his head tipped sideways with his eyes squinched together trying to read my license around the edge of the door.

"Talk about what?"

"About Jacquelyn Richmond."

He jerked his head back and said, "I don't know anything about what happened to her this morning. Are you a reporter?"

Obviously, he had heard the news about Mrs. Richmond's *fall*.

"No. I'm a private investigator."

He stepped back and started to close the door.

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"Please, Mr. Willcox, I know you were seeing her."

He hesitated with the door almost closed.

"The police don't know anything about your affair with Jacquelyn yet," I lied. "I just want to ask you a couple of questions."

He banged the door open on the chain again and glared at me through the crack. "Jackie and I were *not* having an affair; that was a lie her husband and his lawyers concocted to invalidate her claim to any part of his estate."

"Her husband's lawyer hired me to follow her, Mr. Willcox; I know she was coming here to your apartment every day."

"If you helped Richmond and his lawyers set up that fraudulent divorce," he said, "you're partially responsible for what happened to her today."

"At the time, I didn't have a clue that Mr. Richmond's allegation of infidelity was a fabrication," I said, once again stretching the truth. "All I want to do now is find out what was really going on and see if I can set the record straight. Will you give me a little help here, Mr. Willcox?"

"Setting the record straight isn't going to help Jackie now, or me, for that matter—" he sighed and shook his head "—but come in if you want."

Willcox's third-floor apartment, a subdivided condo unit in one of the Back Bay's old brownstones, was neat, clean, and sparsely furnished. In the bright afternoon sunlight slanting in through bay windows that looked out on Marlborough Street, I could see a flesh-colored bandage across the bridge of Wilcox's nose and dark purple crescents under both of his eyes.

"Bump into a door, Mr. Willcox?"

"No, bumped into a hoodlum in a ski mask on the Common a few nights ago."

"A mugging?"

"That's what the police called it, a mugging."

"You don't think it was?"

"No."

"They rob you?"

"It was a *he*, not a *they*, and yes, he robbed me."

"So what makes you think it wasn't a mugging?"

"Long story."

I let that one go for the moment and asked him, "Why was Jacquelyn Richmond coming here every day?"

"I'm writing—that is, I *was* writing—a book, an exposé on politics and corruption in Massachusetts. Jackie was helping me. She had inside information on a series of shady real estate deals her

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husband and a couple of Beacon Hill politicians had engineered."

"She was feeding you dirt on her husband?"

"Yes."

"But why? Why would she rat on her husband?"

"About a year ago, Jackie found out he was keeping a mistress in a condo down on the waterfront. When she confronted him, he got nasty and threatened to dump her without a dime if she didn't keep her nose out of his business, which he probably couldn't have done. Ironically, her attempt at revenge, coming here to help me with my book every day, is what gave Richmond what he needed to make good on his threat."

"Why did she come to you? I mean, how did she know you were doing an political corruption exposé?"

"Jackie was a documents analyst for the Tremont Media Research Center. I met her there a couple of months ago while I was looking into allegations of questionable contract practices and cost overruns on the Big Dig. We got to talking about my book and she asked me if I'd be interested in verifiable information she had on insider real estate deals involving R. A. Richmond and certain high-ranking politicians. I told her I'd look at what she had. I did, and it was dynamite. She had copies of paperwork on real estate transfers that implicated her husband and at least two politicians in a scheme to defraud the state. The stuff she had was good enough to be a whole chapter in my book."

"You said you were, not *are*, writing the book?"

"That's right, past tense."

"What happened?"

He sighed and plopped himself down on a chrome-legged minimalist couch upholstered in black. "A week ago, six-plus feet of steroidal bulk crammed into an ill-fitting, dung-colored suit dropped by to see me. Told me he represented R. A. Richmond. Said Richmond wanted to buy the rights to my book. He showed me a cashier's check for fifty thousand dollars and a six-page contract. The contract granted Richmond all rights to the book and the research material and prohibited me from ever quote-unquote 'publishing, causing to have published, or in any way disclosing any or all of the information in the above mentioned material.' "

"So you signed?"

"No, not then I didn't. That book was my big chance to make it as a creditable investigative journalist and a published author. I told him to take the check and the contract and leave.

"He told me that was a bad decision. Said if I had an accident or anything happened to me, I might never be able to finish the book.

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"The next night I got jumped and robbed. A broken nose and three cracked ribs. I spent the night at Mass General; I had a mild concussion and they wanted to check for internal injuries.

"When I got home the next morning, the door was unlocked and Richmond's thug was waiting for me right here inside my apartment. He had the contract and a check, only this time the check was for twenty thousand dollars. When I hesitated, he said, 'No problem, I'll be back, but on the next go-round, the check will be five thousand.' I signed."

"That's extortion," I said. "Did you tell the cops about Richmond's guy threatening you?"

"Are you kidding? The contract is legitimate, and I couldn't prove that he threatened me, much less had anything to do with the mugging. These are bad people, Ms. Dymond. Even if I signed a complaint, I'd probably never live long enough to testify in court."

Extortion, assault, and robbery. Richmond was bad people all right. But I still couldn't see a motive in any of it for his murdering his ex-wife.

"Did Jackie know you sold the book to Richmond?"

"Yes, I called her and told her our deal was off, that I'd sold the whole package to Richmond."

"And how did she react to that?"

"She went ballistic. Called me a gutless wimp. Said she was going take everything she had to the media."

Now *there* was motive for murder.

I had parked just off Marlborough Street at a fifteen-minute meter on Clarendon, and as I rounded the corner, a self-righteous meter maid with a sneer on her face was slipping a ticket under my windshield wiper. I broke into a run, fumbling through the change in the bottom of my bag, and yelled, "Hey, wait a minute!" I waved a quarter at her, but she dismissed my plea with a snap of her head and swaggered off down Clarendon Street.

I threw the ticket into the glove compartment, dug out my cell phone, and called Lucas at the station. The call went through, but someone else picked up at his desk and told me Lucas was tied up at the moment. I left a message for him to call Val on her cell as soon as he could; it was urgent.

I was nudging my way through the Charles Circle traffic at the foot of the Longfellow Bridge when Lucas called back.

"What's up, Val?"

"Have to talk to you; I just had a long chat with Willcox."

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"Willcox?"

"You know, the writer Jacquelyn was seeing."

"Oh yeah, right. Look, I'm kinda busy right now. We're interrogating Max Bernhard."

"Jacquelyn's first husband?"

"Yeah, looks promising. I think we've got our guy."

"Is he in custody, has he been charged with anything?"

"Not yet, but I think we've got probable cause."

"I was on my way over to let you know what Willcox told me. I'm coming up Cambridge Street now; I'll be there in five minutes."

"I don't know, Val, I don't think that's a very good—"

"Listen, Luke, I know you're going to want to hear what Willcox had to say."

Silence on the other end of the line, then, "All right, all right, I'll give your name to the officer on the desk downstairs. Just show him ID and he'll let you come up."

I parked in front of the station in a space marked OFFICIAL POLICE BUSINESS ONLY, showed the cop on the front desk my ID, and headed upstairs.

Halfway up, a buff, middle-aged guy in full yuppie regalia brushed by me on his way down the stairs. He was wearing a Quaker-gray Brooks Brothers suit, gold wire-rimmed, rose-colored glasses, and a frustrated frown.

Following one step behind him, two hundred fifty pounds of muscle in an ill-fitting, olive brown suit took up so much of the stairway that I had to turn sideways to let him pass by. Shaved head, no eyebrows, watery little red-rimmed eyes like two berries pressed into his putty-colored face, a protruding lower lip, and a fresh, angry red scratch across his left cheek.

Lucas was waiting for me upstairs. He buzzed me through the gate and led the way to his desk.

"Who was the thousand-dollar suit with the long face I just passed on the stairs?"

"That was Richmond. He came to pick up his wife's personal effects; got his undies in a bunch when I told him I couldn't release anything that was part of an ongoing investigation. You didn't recognize him?"

"Never met the man face to face; he did his business with me through his lawyer. And the muscle tagging along with him, who was that?"

Lucas shrugged. "Driver? Gofer? Bodyguard? Whatever, take your pick."

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What was it Willcox had said to me, something about six-plus feet of steroidal bulk in a dung-colored suit? I should have guessed.

Lucas leaned his lovely butt against the edge of his desk, folded his arms across his chest, and gave me a cat-who-ate-the-canary smile.

"So now you're thinking what?" I asked. "Her first husband did her?"

"Yeah," he said. "I like him for it. When we dug a little deeper, we came up with a restraining order Jacquelyn had taken out on him. Apparently, after they were divorced, he wanted her back; kept bugging her with late night phone calls and attempts to confront her every time she left her house. She finally had him served with a cease-and-desist order."

"Sounds weak to me," I said, "but I suppose it goes to motive."

Lucas nodded. "Sure does. And he has no alibi for the time of the murder. Claims he tied one on last night and was still sleeping it off when we woke him up with our phone call this morning."

"No witnesses, right?"

"Right. Says he was alone from the time he left the bar at midnight till we called him at eleven o'clock this morning. So now we've got motive and opportunity."

I shook my head. "That's still pretty thin."

"Maybe, but then look at his sheet: arrested, pled guilty, and fined three times for drunkenness and/or disturbing the peace; collared once for assault and battery—beat that one with a good lawyer and a claim of self defense; and busted once for assault with a deadly weapon, a shod foot—got a year's probation on that one. And he's six-two and built like a bulldozer; he'd have had no trouble tossing a hundred and twenty–pound woman off a roof."

I could tell by the smug look on his face there was more. "And?" I asked.

He raised his eyebrows and gave me a confused "and what?"

"And, come on, give me the rest of it. This is your old partner Val, remember me? I know you well enough to know there's more."

He looked pleased with himself. "Well," he said, "Max got a real case of the jitters, you know, when we started leaning on him? Asked if he could smoke. I told him you weren't supposed to smoke anywhere inside the building. I looked around like I was making sure no one was watching, then told him, 'Go ahead; just make sure you put the ashes and the butts in your empty soda can.' "

"Let me guess," I said. "He smokes Camels."

"You got it, Camels, no filters. He chain-smoked four of 'em in

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less than thirty minutes. If we could get a DNA match with the cigarette butts we took off the roof, we can put Maxwell Bernhard on the scene."

"Jesus, Luke, you're on shaky ground there. You can't take his DNA without his permission if you haven't arrested him. Even then, you'd need a court order if he refused."

"Yeah, I know, but he's not that bright. He denies being anywhere near Tremont Media Research Center this morning, says he doesn't even know where it is; but if we let him think we can get a DNA match on the cigarette butts, we may be able to turn him."

"Has he asked for a lawyer?"

"No, but he hasn't been charged with anything yet. I'm holding him as a material witness for now—" Lucas looked at his watch. "—and I can hold him on that for another twenty-two hours."

He looked up from his watch and gave me a frown. "So what was it about this Willcox guy you had to rush over here to tell me?"

I laid it all out for Lucas: Willcox's exposé, Jacquelyn Richmond's contribution of dirt on her husband, Richmond's thug approaching Willcox with an offer to buy the book and his veiled threat, Willcox's mugging followed by the return of Richmond's thug, and Richmond's eventual purchase of all rights to the book, which resulted in Jacquelyn's threat to go to the media.

"So what do you think," I asked Lucas, "sound like a motive for murder?"

He was scowling and shaking his head. "Sounds like sour grapes, happenstance, and hearsay to me. Right out of the gate, Willcox's tale of woe about Richmond intimidating him into selling out cheap sounds like sour grapes. And it is, until it's verified; just his side of the story."

Lucas had held up three fingers on one hand and was ticking them off one at a time with the forefinger of his other hand.

"Secondly, if Willcox can't identify the assailant, his getting mugged on the Common the day after Richmond's first offer is happenstance; there's no way of tying the mugging to Richmond."

Lucas ticked off the third finger.

"And thirdly, anything Willcox says Jacquelyn said to him about going to the media is hearsay, and now that she's dead, there's no way to verify it."

"And how do you explain the Neanderthal showing up with Richmond's reduced offer the day after the mugging?" I asked him.

"If you can't tie Richmond's first offer to buy the book to the

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mugging because there's no ID on the assailant, then you can't tie the second offer to the mugging either."

"I think that's a circular argument," I said. "But what you're trying to tell me is, you don't believe his story."

Lucas shrugged. "Sounds like some writer's conspiracy theory to me. Wasn't it Grafton who said that writers are just telling lies for fun and profit?"

No, that was Block, but he was referring to fiction; Willcox is a journalist."

Lucas gave me a contemptuous look and humphed. "Journalists! Half the tell-all exposés that so-called journalists write and get published at the rate of one a month these days are nothing but tabloids in hardcover. But fact or fiction, your whole Willcox scenario hangs on whether the dirt Willcox claims Jacquelyn had on Richmond was so incriminating that he'd commit murder to keep it quiet. And now that he's bought the whole package from Willcox, there's no way you'll ever know."

My head told me that what Lucas was saying made sense. My intuition was telling me something else. And there was something about Richmond's coming to pick up his dead wife's personal effects before the body was even cold that bothered me.

"Did you find a disk or any documents in Jacquelyn's bag?"

Lucas shook his head. "Nope. ID, credit cards, a little money, comb, keys, a compact, the usual stuff."

"Nothing in her pockets like papers, a notebook?"

"Uh-uh. Just some lint and a couple of Kleenex."

"Where was she living after the divorce?"

Lucas took a notebook out of his pocket and flipped through the pages. "An apartment on Endicott Street."

"Have you been over there yet?"

"Not yet. Like I told you, we're short handed this week. Been tied up here all afternoon questioning Bernhard—" he gave me a scowl "—and wasting time listening to you."

"Endicott's less than five minutes from here," I said. "What do you say we go over and take a look?"

Lucas arched his eyebrows. "We? You mean *we* as in you and me?"

"Why not? You said you're shorthanded."

"You and me are not going anywhere on police business, Val. You're not on the force anymore; you're a civilian."

"You and I," I said.

"What?"

"You and *I* are not going anywhere."

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"Right, that's what I said."
"Come on, Luke, just a quick peek at her place."
"Not gonna happen, Val."
"What harm could it do?"
"No!"
I looked up at him and batted my eyes. "I thought you said you owed me one."

Lucas was stepping up to Jacquelyn's door with the key in his hand when he noticed that someone had taken a crowbar to the doorjamb alongside the lock. He pushed me sideways away from the door with one hand and drew his gun with the other. He gripped the compact Glock in a two-handed hold with the muzzle pointed toward the ceiling and nudged open the door with his foot. He looked over at me and mouthed, "Stay," then stepped cautiously into the room.

"Stay." It sounded like something you'd say to a dog. I waited until he'd made it to the middle of the room, then I stepped in behind him.

We were standing in a small living room with a kitchenette to our left and a short hallway to our right. Two doors stood facing each other at the end of the hallway. Both of them were open. There was a computer desk against the far wall between the kitchen and the hallway. It was one of those home office setups done in laminated imitation cherry with a nest of shelves and cubbyholes perched above the desktop and a stack of drawers below. Someone had searched it. And it looked like whoever searched it had used a backhoe. The contents of the gaping drawers and the empty shelves were scattered all over the top of the desk and the floor. A thirteen-inch flat screen and a keyboard sat on the desk amidst the debris, but a snarl of ripped-out cables was all that remained of the hard drive.

Lukas shot a quick glance at the empty kitchen, then turned, with his pistol still held at port arms, and did a boxerlike shuffle down the hallway. I followed a couple of steps behind him. He leveled his gun and ducked through the door on the right. An empty bathroom. He backed out, crossed the hall, and eased through the opposite doorway into a bedroom.

Lucas had taken two steps into the room when Richmond's monstrous bodyguard bolted from behind the door and swung Jacquelyn's hard drive at the back of his head. Lucas heard or sensed the movement behind him. He scrunched his shoulders

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and ducked to his right. The hard drive grazed the left side of his head and slammed into his shoulder with a sickening thunk. His knees buckled, but he didn't go down. The thug tucked the hard drive to his chest like an NFL fullback, straight-armed Lucas out of his way, and made a dash for the open window and the fire escape.

He was quick for a man of his size, but I was quicker. He had made it to the window when I caught up with him and grabbed a hold of the back of his belt. With one foot on the floor and the other up over the windowsill, he bent forward to duck through the window. Still holding on to the back of his belt, I slapped my other hand up into his crotch, grabbed a handful of his manhood, and squeezed. I leaned back, dug in both heels, and yanked him back into the room. He went up on his toes, howled like a banshee, dropped the hard drive, reached down behind himself with both hands, and clawed at my wrist.

Lucas came up beside me and holstered his gun. Blood oozed from the gash above his ear and he was favoring his left arm, but he managed to get the handcuffs off his belt and cuff Richmond's baldheaded bruiser. He patted him down for weapons, spun him around, and shoved him facedown on the bed. He put a knee in the middle of the big man's back and dug a wallet out of his back pocket.

As he thumbed through the stuff in the guy's wallet, Lucas shook his head and pressed his lips together to suppress a smile. "*Percival Butterfield?* Is that your real name?"

The thug curled up his lip and suggested that Lucas engage in a sexual act with himself.

Lucas grabbed him by the arm and yanked him up into a sitting position. "Well, Percival Butterfield, you're under arrest for burglary, attempted grand theft, assault on an officer, and resisting arrest. You have the right to remain silent; anything you do say can and will be used against you in a court of law; you have the right—"

"Save ya breath, Sipowicz; I know the drill. I wanna lawyer."

"—to an attorney during questioning; if you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided without—"

"You hard-a hearin', scuzz?" he snarled. "I wanna—"

"Yeah, yeah," Lucas cut in, "and I wanna win Megabucks and buy a condo on Commonwealth Ave. Do you understand these rights I've recited to you?"

He gave Lucas a sullen look and said nothing.

Lucas bent over, cupped his mouth, and yelled in Butterfield's ear, "Should I do it again a little louder, Percy?"

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The big man jerked his head away from Lucas. "I heard ya the first time."

"Good," Lucas said. "I'll take that as an affirmative answer."

Lucas fingered the gash on his head and winced. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, pressed it to the side of his head, and looked over at the battered hard drive that was sitting on the floor under the window. He glanced back at Butterfield, then looked up at me. I could almost see the circuit board flashing behind those baby blue eyes as he finally connected the dots.

Lucas pulled out his cell phone and called in for the Crime Scene Unit and transportation for Butterfield. "We get you back to the station," he said to Butterfield, "I may add a couple of charges."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"For starters, assault for the mugging of Willcox, and robbery."

"Hey, I don't know nothin' about any mugging on the Common."

"I didn't say where he was mugged. How do you know it was on the Common?"

Butterfield gave his shoulders an unconcerned shrug and blinked his beady little eyes. "Musta heard it on the news."

"Heard it on the news, huh? We'll see how well that plays after he picks you out of a lineup."

"He ain't gonna pick me outta no lineup. I was . . ."

"Go ahead, finish it. Was wearing a mask, is that what you were going to say?"

I walked around to the other side of the bed so Butterfield couldn't see me and held up my hand to get Luke's attention. I tapped my left cheek, pointed to Butterfield, then curled my fingers and made a clawing motion.

Lucas frowned, looked back down at the bodyguard's face, then pursed his lips and nodded. He jammed his fingers up under the massive jaw and dragged his thumb through the thin incrustation on the inflamed scratch across Butterfield's cheek. "Where'd you get the scratch, Percy?"

He jerked his head away from Lucas's hand. "Musta cut myself shaving."

"What were you shaving with, a garden rake?"

Butterfield just tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

Lucas was looking at the smear of blood on the end of his thumb. "Where were you at nine o'clock this morning, Percy?"

"I ain't sayin' anotha freakin' word till I get with a lawyer."

Lucas waved his blood-smeared thumb in Butterfield's face. "We

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match this to scrapings from under Jacquelyn Richmond's fingernails, Percy, it won't make much difference what you do or don't say, you'll spend the next forty years playing drop-the-soap in the shower at MCI Cedar Junction."

Butterfield was starting to sweat. He looked down at his feet and mumbled something to Lucas about an attorney.

Lucas shrugged. "Okay, if that's the route you want to go. You clam up and I take you in and book you for murder. I turn everything over to the D.A., he gets you indicted, and you go on trial for the big One. It'll be a laugher, believe me, the D.A. won't even break a sweat getting a conviction for premeditated murder. You lawyer up now and I turn it over to the D.A., then there's nothing I can do here to help you. See what I'm saying?"

Butterfield looked up at Lucas. His shaved head glistened with sweat, but there was a glimmer of hope in his little black-button eyes. "Whata ya saying you can do that'll help me?"

"Look, let me lay it out for you. When this breaks and the feces hits the fan, Richmond's gonna be scrambling with both hands to cover his butt. And if you think he won't throw you out of the boat to save himself, Percy, you're hallucinating. He'll say he sent you to meet with Jacquelyn and offer to buy her out, same as he did with Willcox, and when she told you to stuff it, you lost it and tossed her off the roof.

"Now, if what really happened is, Richmond tells you to get his ex-wife to meet you on the roof where she works, then when she shows, throw her over the side. But you know there's no way you're going to commit murder, so when she gets up there, you try to get her to buy a deal like Willcox did not to go public. You tell her Richmond is planning to whack her, and this is the only way she can save her life. In this scenario, *she* loses it and attacks *you*, and in the ensuing struggle, she *accidentally* goes over the side."

Butterfield was scowling and shaking his head. "So what's the difference?"

"The difference is, in scenario one, Richmond walks, and you go down for murder one. In scenario two, you turn state's evidence, give the D.A. Richmond, and they let you plead down to involuntary manslaughter. With any luck, you get off with nine to twelve, and Richmond goes down for conspiracy to commit.

Butterfield chewed on his protruding lower lip. "Jesus, twelve years."

"Hey," Lucas said, "beats the hell out of doing life."

Because there's a better chance of finding a Republican in

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Cambridge than there is of finding a parking space in the North End, Lucas had hiked the half mile from the police station on New Sudbury Street to my apartment on his lunch hour. When he called to say he was coming, I asked him to pick up a pizza. He had stopped at Ernesto's on Salem Street and bought a large pepper and onion—my favorite—and was sitting at my kitchen table trying to eat pizza, drink beer from a bottle, and talk at the same time. It had been two and a half weeks since we'd nabbed Percival Butterfield in Jacquelyn's apartment, and Lucas had stopped by to bring me up to date.

"Butterfield did roll on Richmond," he said, "but he had to settle for man one with a recommendation for fifteen years; the D.A. wouldn't go for involuntary." Lucas took a big bite of pizza and dabbed at a dribble of oil on his chin with a paper napkin. "And you've heard that Richmond's been indicted?"

"Yes, it's been all over the news. Want another beer?"

"Sure, thanks. The problem now is his attorney has filed a pretrial motion to suppress Butterfield's confession, his testimony, and the contents of the hard drive we took out of Jacquelyn's apartment."

I got two bottles of beer out of the fridge and brought them back to the table. "On what grounds?"

Lucas sipped the head off the top of his beer. "Illegal search and seizure. Because we went into the apartment without a search warrant, they're claiming the hard drive was obtained in an illegal search."

"Yeah, but why the exclusion of Butterfield's statement? He was Mirandized."

" 'Fruit of the poisoned tree,' they're claiming."

"Regardless of your intent when you went to the apartment," I said, "the D.A. should argue that once you got there and found the apartment had been broken into, it became a crime scene. Entry, apprehension of Butterfield, taking his statement, and seizure of evidence was all done pursuant to the investigation of the crime."

"That is what he's going to argue. You oughta be a lawyer, Val."

"Why do you think I'm bustin' my back taking night classes? And I'll bet you the bill for the pizza the motion to suppress is just the first in a string of delays. With the money Richmond's got, he'll hire a Dream Team that can delay this thing from now till Whitey Bulger comes home."

"Yup," Lucas said, "in our system, the accused has the right to the best defense money can buy. And you're right, this is just the first

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salvo in what's shaping up to be a long, drawn-out court battle."

I had slid the next to last piece of pizza out of the box and was munching away contentedly when I remembered the cigarette butts. "What about those cigarette butts we found on the roof?"

"Ah yes," Lucas said, "the cigarette butts. That was Richmond's fail-safe plan. He had Butterfield break into Max Bernhard's room, grab a handful of old cigarette butts, and plant 'em on the roof when he pitched Jackie over the side. If we didn't buy her death as a suicide on the first go-round, he was going to fake an anonymous call to the police by someone who would claim they'd seen a guy fitting Max Bernhard's description hanging around behind the access door to the roof the morning she was killed."

"Cute," I said. "And if you'd ever gotten around to doing a DNA test on Bernhard, he'd have been hard-pressed to prove he wasn't on the roof that morning."

Lucas pointed to the last piece of pizza. I shook my head. "Go ahead, I've had all I want. So how do you think it'll shake out once they get into the actual trial?"

"It's not a slam dunk, but I don't think Richmond can beat it; this D.A. is one litigating sonuvabitch. But who knows—" Lucas shrugged his shoulders "—I just hook 'em and book 'em, it's up to the D.A. to cook 'em."

Lucas slid his chair back and stood up. "Well, guess I better get going."

I jumped up, scooted around the table, and walked him to the door.

I put my hand on his shoulder as he opened the door. "Thanks for the pizza and the update, Luke. Glad you stopped by. And really, I appreciated your putting up with my poking my nose into police business where it didn't belong."

He gave me that blue-eyed boyish grin. "I should be thanking you, Val; I'm the one who came out of this smelling like a rose. Did I mention that the lieutenant's putting me in for a commendation?"

"No, you didn't. Congratulations."

What the hell, I thought, *it's now or never.* I reached out and closed the door, slipped my arms around his neck, went up on my toes, and kissed him full on the mouth. He was still holding on to the doorknob, but he returned the kiss. He ran his other hand down my back, slid his fingertips inside the waistband of my pants, and pulled me hard against himself. I felt a tingly infusion of warmth and lightheadedness . . . then the damned phone on the kitchen counter rang.

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On the second ring, Lucas drew back and shot a glance at the phone. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to ignore it, but the incessant jangling had shattered the mood.

I walked to the counter, shaking my head, and grabbed the phone off the hook. I looked back over my shoulder at Lucas.

He winked, blew me kiss, and walked out the door.

"Yeah, what!" I growled into the phone.

It was Jake Wiener, one of the attorneys who hire me to serve papers. He'd picked up the scuttlebutt at the gin mill where he and his fellow shysters hang out that I was the one who did the legwork for Bradley, Braxton & Lieberwitz on the Richmond divorce. And would I be interested, he wanted to know, in digging up some "unfit to take custody" evidence for a divorce case he was handling?

"Sorry," I said, without thinking twice. "I don't do divorce work."

Solution to the June "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Respect
B. Griddle
C. Ossify
D. Understand
E. Lugubrious
F. Awkward
G. Rye bread
H. Teddy bear
I. Tattletale
J. Hittites
K. Exhaust
L. Deplete
M. In the red
N. Mister
O. Establish
P. Deceptive
Q. Enthused
R. Trump card
S. Euphonium
T. Centerfold
U. Twenty-one
V. Ivory Coast
W. Vehement
X. Echo chamber
Y. Shelter

QUOTATION

Author—R(on) GOULART
Work—THE HARD-BOILD DECADE
(From *The Dime Detectives,* published by Mysterious Press)

"The pulp industry . . . was stimulated by the Depression. . . . Over eighty . . . pulps were introduced . . . and Nick Carter returned. . . . Several . . . notable mystery men . . . made their debut . . . such as . . . Secret Agent X. But most of all, the thirties were the decade of the hard-boiled detective."

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Busman's Holiday

Though every mystery bookstore seeks to cultivate relationships with authors, **Murder by the Book** in Houston, Texas can truly be said to both support and inspire mystery writers. The store's general manager, Dean James, is an Agatha Award–winning author, while the store itself was the inspiration for the eponymous bookshop in Carolyn Hart's well-loved Death on Demand series.

Among the nation's oldest and largest mystery bookstores, Murder by the Book opened in 1980, and though it has not moved far from its original location, the store today is almost four times as large as it was then. It has been owned and operated throughout its existence by Martha Farrington.

Selling both new and used books, the store deals almost exclusively in mystery, detective, espionage, and crime fiction. The staff cultivates a large base of repeat customers through recommendations; a store newsletter, *The Dead Beat*, published five times a year; and e-mail updates sent out three to four times a month.

Many customers particularly enjoy the store's ongoing series of author luncheons, which debuted six years ago with Anne Perry as the first guest. These popular events are held at a nearby private club and last for two hours; recent guests include Laurie R. King and Carolyn Haines.

In addition to the luncheons, the store maintains an active slate of author readings and signings, sometimes cooperating with Brazos Bookstore, an independent bookseller located just a block away. Otherwise, the two store dogs, Archie Goodwin and Lily Rowan, are regular attractions, while such touches as skull bookends, a collection of poison bottles, Christie and Holmes memorabilia, and photos of visiting authors help maintain the appropriate atmosphere.

Mr. James notes that the late Joan Lowery Nixon, four time Edgar Award winner, was a particular friend of Murder by the Book, and the store is also pleased to count local authors Bill Crider, Julie Wray Herman, and newcomer Leeann Sweeney among its friends and patrons. For mystery readers interested in a tour of Texas, he recommends: *Mercy* by David Lindsey (Houston); *The Red Scream* by Mary Willis Walker (Austin); *Blood and Money* by Thomas Thompson (Houston; true crime); *A Kiss Gone Bad* by Jeff Abbott (Texas Gulf Coast); and *Big Red Tequila* by Rick Riordan (San Antonio).

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BURNT WOOD

MITCH ALDERMAN

While Elvis sniffed the bushes and howled at something fascinating in the dark yard, Bubba stood in the back porch doorway in his shorts and T-shirt enjoying the quiet cold. The phone rang. It was almost six, cloudy and gusty, one of those frozen late December mornings that Florida never advertises. Bubba yelled at Elvis to finish his business, get in the house, there was at least one neighbor still trying to sleep. The phone rang and rang. After twelve rings, Bubba let the door swing shut and went to answer the call, even though he knew it wouldn't be Kathi.

"Ah, Bubba Simms, my favorite private investigator, did I wake you?" Arnold Johannson's optimistic voice asked.

"No, I was watching the dog."

"That's a new one. Watching the dog. I'll remember that."

"Never mind. Are you at the office already?" Arnold was the VP in charge of claims with State Wide Insurance, Winter Haven's largest employer, at their regional headquarters on Lake Alfred Road. Arnold was also Bubba's occasional employer.

"I came in to check something before I called. There's been a fire at O'Malley's Woodworks. Check it out. We don't want to pay this claim. Some damn fool agent wrote a replacement value policy. This thing could be a bundle."

"It's time and a half if I go this early." It had to be important. Arnold hated to part with a dime of State Wide's money, much less Bubba's two-fifty a day. But Bubba's tenure as a sergeant in the Polk County Sheriff's Department gave him an edge that usually paid off for the company.

"You're funny. Grab some coffee at a drive-thru. Call me as soon as you know something. Now I have to go watch a dog. Bye."

Bubba went back to the porch and opened the door. The young bluetick hound rushed in, ready for breakfast. Bubba agreed it was a pretty good idea. He wished he had time to scramble five or six eggs and make enough toast to fight the cold. But the coffee was finishing its gurgle and Elvis could

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have a bowl of that stuff the vet recommended while Bubba dressed.

Bubba cut through the residential area by Lake Link to the light industrial section off Dundee Road on the east side of town. He held a travel mug of coffee in his left hand; a filled Thermos was on the back seat. There was no traffic, the homes still dark. Christmas vacation had started for public schools and everyone was sleeping in, only three more shopping days left.

O'Malley's Woodworks was located in an old building that had once been a barn for citrus equipment. It sat in the middle of a metal-building maze only a couple of years old that contained assorted small businesses mixed with warehousing. Bubba smelled the burnt wood before reaching the fire scene because Elvis insisted on having the window down when he rode in the Bronco. The thirty degree air had awakened them completely. When Bubba stopped and opened the door, Elvis bounded across his lap and out, ran around the truck, then heeled beside him. Bubba told him to stay, then walked over to shake hands with Frank Harris, deputy fire chief of the Winter Haven department.

"Damn, Sergeant, you're here early. Does Arnold ever sleep?" Frank asked.

"Only during the equinoxes. What's happening?"

"Arson, I think. I could smell gasoline when we arrived. It started on the back side and was pretty well involved. Luckily, this building's separate from the ones nearby. Wasn't hard to keep it contained. We're about done, killing a few embers." Frank waved his arm at the firemen moving among the burnt timbers, poking and prodding with the pikes, ripping the structure apart. Frank had his bunkers on, the turnout jacket open, helmet tilted back on his head. In his full equipment, Frank looked nearly as big as Bubba.

"Not much left."

"Old frame building filled with kiln-dried wood, paints and thinners. Wasn't sending my boys into that to save equipment." The roof had fallen in. The standing walls formed irregular patterns like graphs. Blackened table saws, band saws, and planers stood above the rubble like a robot's nightmare. "Saved the foundation though. Haven't lost one in thirty years."

Bubba nodded at Frank's usual joke. He saw Patrick O'Malley standing beside his faded Silverado pickup, parked beyond the fire engine. He looked haggard and a bit lost. He was shivering in a work shirt and khaki pants. Bubba had on a green plaid, long-

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sleeved Pendleton wool shirt and jeans. He felt good; he wasn't sweating. Bubba sweated nine or ten months out of the year. One of the prices for being six-five and weighing three hundred and twenty pounds.

"Arson?" Bubba asked.

"On the far side of the structure, there was about fifteen feet of wall that went up at the same time, as close as I can tell. We'll conduct a further investigation after the boys finish, but you can tell Arnold that he can be as slow as he wants in paying the claim. It is suspicious. When did you get the dog?"

"About six months ago."

"Just after . . ."

"About the time Kathi and I separated, yes. His name is Elvis." Bubba signaled with his hand and Elvis trotted over to receive his petting from Frank. Then he lifted his head. His nose twitched like he had found olfactory heaven.

"Excuse me, Frank, I'm going to have a word with O'Malley." Bubba stepped over the hoses and around the groups of men finishing their work. When he reached the Silverado, O'Malley had slumped against the front fender and was shaking his head.

"Tough break, Patrick," Bubba said.

He looked up at Bubba. "The gods have been pissing on my parade for months, but they really must have drunk beer last night. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Why don't we sit inside your truck and turn on the heater? You look cold."

"The heater's busted. Never fixed it. Who needs a heater in Imperial Polk County, citrus capital of Florida?" Patrick stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Let's go to the Bronco then."

Patrick followed Bubba and climbed in the passenger side. Elvis looked to join them, but Bubba waved him off. The hound trotted over to the nearest pile of debris and inhaled deeply. Bubba closed the windows, cranked the engine, and turned the heater wide open. After a couple of moments, Patrick relaxed and leaned against the door.

Bubba looked at the little Irishman. Truly Irish, he had immigrated about eight years before. Bubba had met him upon his arrival in Winter Haven. Bubba had responded to a disturbance in a juke joint. He'd found the remnants of a fight. Patrick's eye was closing and his lip was split, but he was standing and the other two weren't. Alcohol had been involved, so Bubba gave Patrick a ride home and listened to the roll of his brogue. The good old boys had

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learned to avoid Patrick's temper and left hook. Now rumor had it that he had mellowed since he opened his business, probably too tired to fight at night.

"Any idea what happened?" Bubba asked.

Patrick shook his head and rubbed his eyes. Bubba noticed that he didn't have socks with his loafers, must have jumped out of bed when the fire department called.

"Patrick, I need to tell you that State Wide hired me to look into this fire, check out the circumstances."

"Ah, so that's what becomes of sheriff's sergeants when they retire. They take the dollar of the big corporation." Patrick grinned as he spoke.

"Working men do what they can."

"Well, I was safe in my true love's arms when the fire started, that's where call forwarding found me. But I'm ruined if the claim is denied. A lot of fine wood went up in smoke, fine wood that I still owe a bill on. Ah, maybe I was never meant to be an owner, just a craftsman worthy of his hire."

A Ford Taurus stopped next to the Silverado and a woman stepped out carrying a coat and a large cup of Mickey D's coffee.

"There is my salvation now. Bringing my jacket and coffee. Heaven is missing an angel, I tell you," Patrick said as he opened the Bronco door to step out. "I understand what you have to do, Bubba, but remember, I didn't burn my own business. I'm many things but not a craven capitalist."

Bubba nodded to him and turned off the Bronco. He watched the work of the firemen and Elvis sniffing around, then he walked over to the Taurus. Patrick looked warmer with his jacket on, the coffee steaming in his hand and Maria Cartwright snuggled against him. She was dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex.

"How dare you think Patrick burned his business. He was home with me," Maria said when Bubba reached them. Maria, who barely came up to Patrick's shoulder, had her mother's dark beauty.

Maria's parents were major suppliers of laborers to the citrus industry for harvesting and caretaking of the groves that surrounded Winter Haven. The citrus industry had learned to outsource everyone they could. Permanent employees meant benefits and vacations, costs to be avoided. Willard Cartwright had been a redneck fruit picker when he came across sixteen-year-old Carmela Diego dragging a picking ladder through an old stand of navel oranges. Mutual love at first sight and eighty-hour work weeks had transformed them. Willard had learned Tex-Mex Spanish and Carmela spoke Southern drawl. Maria and

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Audrey were their daughters; they'd had no sons.

"Just doing my job. Somebody set this fire. Insurance companies don't pay off on arson unless they know for sure the owner didn't do it. You can understand."

"I can, just as long as you understand Patrick didn't do it."

Bubba was nodding when a black Lincoln Town Car stopped behind the Taurus. It had a HAVEN REALTY, YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD REALTORS sign on the front door. A tall, slender, well-dressed woman in heels with her makeup already in place emerged with a big smile on her face and a golden wool cape flowing around her. Audrey Taylor had arrived.

"Ah, the Queen of Briarwood Estates," Patrick said, referring to the most exclusive development in Winter Haven. Even the firemen stopped to watch her runway stride across the asphalt.

"Bubba, you about ready to put that big, beautiful house on the market? It's much too much for a single man. With people gobbling up lakeside property, it would go in just weeks," Audrey said as she walked up to Bubba, who smiled and kissed the proffered cheek. Audrey was built like her father but looked like neither parent. She had her own kind of intense beauty. She often said that you could never be too rich, too organized, or too skinny, but from the look of her collarbones, Bubba thought she might be exceeding the skinny boundary.

"Not this week, Audrey. But if I ever change my mind, I'll let you know." Bubba finished his words to Audrey's back as she turned to her sister and Patrick.

"I am so sorry, Patrick. I know how much all of this meant to you. Whatever will you do now?"

"How did you know to grace us with your presence this morning?" Patrick asked.

"I stopped by Happ's to say hi to all the early morning people and grab a coffee to go. I have an eight o'clock appointment to show a lovely four bedroom, three bath over on Lake Ring. The fire was the talk of the cafe, so I rushed right over. Maria didn't answer her phone so I thought she would be here comforting you. I was right. What will you do now?"

"I haven't had a cigarette or a drink before noon in the two years since I met Maria, but right now it seems like time to share a pint of Guinness with Joe Camel. Care to join me, Audrey?"

Audrey's reply was interrupted by a deep, penetrating howl by Elvis. He stood rigid with his nose stuck into a portion of collapsed exterior wall. Bubba whistled but Elvis stayed where he was. Bubba started toward him, Audrey following behind.

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"Oh, what a pretty dog. Can I pet him? What's his name?"

"Elvis. I bought him in Memphis last year."

"A substitute for Kathi?"

"Not hardly, just a substitute for someone else's voice in the house. As you can hear, he does that pretty good. Cut it out, Elvis." Bubba raised his voice but Elvis howled again. They reached the back of the building, Audrey standing next to Bubba. Patrick and Maria, holding hands, had followed them. Bubba asked one of the firemen to shift the pile Elvis was howling at. Elvis jumped back and ambled over to a spot on the road about fifteen feet away, sniffed, then tracked toward Bubba, veering off as Audrey held out her hand. He ran toward her and stuck his nose directly into her crotch. She shrieked and jumped back. Elvis moved toward her again.

"Get this filthy damn dog away from me, Bubba Simms!" Audrey said. Unfortunately, Elvis's nose had been covered with soot and Audrey's pantsuit was a beige linen. Bubba reached out and snagged Elvis's collar, pulled him close, told him to heel. Elvis looked disappointed. "Son of a bitch, I'll have to go change now."

A fireman was suppressing a grin as he walked over to the pile. He levered over a chunk of wall and looked in. Then he straightened, the grin gone. "Chief Harris, you need to look at this."

Bubba lost his grin too, as he peered into the pile and realized that one of the burnt boards was wearing a boot.

All the firemen stood away from the debris while the chief was on his radio informing the dispatcher that they needed detectives. He yelled over to Bubba, "Are we in county here or still city?"

"County by one street unless things have changed in the last year," Bubba answered. The unincorporated area around Winter Haven had been Bubba's responsibility before he retired. Boundaries had been one of the ever-changing bits of lore he had acquired.

The exchange of shouts seemed to revitalize everyone. Audrey pulled her cape around herself and reached out to her sister, "Maria, come with me. You don't need to be here anymore. That's a dead body."

"I'm staying here."

"Bubba, tell her. This is no place for her."

"Actually, you better stay here, Maria. I'm sure the detectives will want to talk to you. But why don't you sit in your car, get out of this cold," Bubba said, ignoring the glare from Audrey. Patrick started to walk with Maria, but Bubba held out his hand. "Patrick,

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it would be best if the two of you don't talk any more until after you're questioned." They looked at each other, then nodded at Bubba and walked to their vehicles. Audrey made no move to leave.

"That must be a warm wrap, Audrey. You've quit shivering," Bubba said. "I'm sorry about your outfit. Have it cleaned and I'll pay for it. And you might as well go to your appointment."

"I can't believe Patrick would do something like this no matter how tough things were," she said.

"Were things tough?"

"Apparently he's in a bind right now, but nothing serious, I'm sure. Just one of those business moments we all have. He messed up a big order and he's stuck with a lot of expensive wood, I hear. Small operators like Patrick don't have much margin for error. One mistake can be all it takes. But Patrick wouldn't do this, would he?" Audrey shook her head and looked away from the rubble. Then she smiled at Bubba. He felt warmer in the radiance. "Don't worry about the cleaning bill. You just list your house with me if you ever decide to sell." She patted his arm and stepped away from Elvis, who started toward her. The click of her high heels was absorbed by the cold, damp air. She was moving silently, cape billowing by the time she reached the Town Car. With a roar she was gone.

"Come on, fool," Bubba said to Elvis. "I need to find your leash before you stick your nose in any more evidence."

Bubba leaned against the Bronco and watched the deputies arrive in their prowl cars, exchanged greetings with them, and silently critiqued their crime scene procedures. They had done better when he was their boss, but they weren't bad. Technicians were taking pictures when Detective Ray Bisse arrived in his brown Crown Victoria and parked beside the Bronco. The cold made the scar across his chin vivid and more sinister than usual. His gray suit was mediocre as always. He walked over to Bubba with his notebook in his left hand. They shook. He and Bubba had shared responsibility for the same area for the last eight years before Bubba retired.

"How are you?" Ray asked. "What's the word from Kathi?"

"Atlanta is fine. She's painting a portrait of a former senator, and her sister says she can stay forever."

"Tough. But at least you have Elvis the crime-fighting biscuit eater to keep you company. I hear you found the body," Ray said as he squatted down to talk to the happy dog. He rubbed his ears

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and scruffed him back and forth until Elvis howled. Bubba had cleaned off all the grime while they had waited. Then Ray straightened up. "Anything you want to tell me before I go and become official, and hear about Frank saving the foundation?"

"Patrick and Maria have been separated since we found the body. Audrey Taylor was here; she left to take care of business. Nobody touched anything after they found the crispy critter. But before then, of course, the firemen had their pikes and poles into everything. The deputies and the crime scene people did a good job before you arrived."

Ray nodded. A black Mercedes stopped by the fire truck. Ray and Bubba looked at each other. "Now I can find out if the body is really dead or just taking a nap. I love waiting for the medical examiner," Ray said as he started to move away.

"I am going to get some breakfast and take Elvis home."

"You're here without breakfast? Be sure and charge Arnold double. Be back in a couple of hours. I'll have someone take your statement then."

Bubba nodded and opened the door for Elvis. He hopped in and stuck his head out the passenger window. Ray was talking to Chief Harris and making notes by the time Bubba turned the corner and lost sight of them.

Elvis was chewing his second bowl of breakfast when Bubba called Arnold. He answered the phone slightly out of breath. Arnold paced laps around his office constantly, using the speaker phone while he fought the losing battle against his waistline.

"What did you find out?"

"It's arson. And there was a body in the ruins."

"Remains in the ruins? That's bad, but good. This claim will take forever. Did O'Malley do it?"

"Gut reaction says no."

"Well, it doesn't matter to me. No payment until the case is closed. You'll have a complete report by the end of the day?"

"On your desk tomorrow."

"Good man. Go watch your dog."

Bubba hung up and decided to go to Happ's for breakfast instead of cooking. Their food was better and the talk more interesting than the silence while Elvis slept off his meal.

Happ's was packed. Something about cold mornings that made everyone want a hearty breakfast. Bubba took a table after three teenaged boys left. Coffee appeared before he had the chair adjusted. He'd barely spooned some ice from his glass of water

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into his piping hot coffee when Crissie, the little redhaired waitress, brought him his usual scrambled eggs, bacon, and rye toast. She sat the side order of biscuits and sorghum syrup next to his coffee. "Anything else?" she asked.

"Maybe later. I worked up an appetite in the cold out at O'Malley's fire."

"Did somebody really die in it?"

Bubba nodded and chewed his mouthful of eggs, sipped his coffee while Crissie continued. "The fire was the talk early. It had died out, been replaced with speculation about whether it was going to freeze the citrus tonight, but the dead body perked things back up. Who did it?"

"No one at the scene knows. Who's the crowd favorite here?"

"O'Malley himself, of course. He's got troubles and wood burns easy. Not like he had to start a flood. Doesn't take a genius."

"But O'Malley doesn't seem like the type."

"His sister-in-law-to-be doesn't think so either."

"You mean Audrey?"

"Ms. Skinny, twice in one morning, two different outfits, came back with the news about the body and actually ate a biscuit, no jelly, and black coffee. She flat told everyone that no matter how bad things had gotten for Patrick he would never commit arson for the insurance money. That he'd pack up and go back to Ireland before he'd dishonor her sister . . . Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." Crissie took the coffee pot to another table and then headed to the kitchen. Bubba finished his breakfast and thought about dying in a fire on the coldest night of the year.

The next day Bubba was in his office over the empty furniture store in downtown Winter Haven. His report and bill for a half day were being messengered to Arnold. He had his boots propped up on the corner of the desk and the phone caught in the angle of his neck. He was waiting on Ray Bisse to come off hold.

"Okay, I'm back. Everyone here has questions all the time. You aren't calling with questions, are you?"

"Not me. I'm the answer man. The first answer I need is the name of the man who died in O'Malley's fire."

"Guillermo Guizman, an illegal from Honduras. High alcohol content in his blood with some carbon monoxide, but the cause of death was breathing fire. Lungs seared. We're guessing he might have been working off the books at one of those little operations in the complex. Got drunk and needed a place to get out of the wind until work started. Found a space between a scrap lumber

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pile and the wall. Might never have known there was a fire. Like to think so anyway."

"Patrick's alibi held up?"

"Maria Cartwright might be a cute and cuddly fifth-grade teacher but she gave me what for. Not a bit of give in her story. Patrick was with her, no question. Which is a shame. He had the motive and the means were simple. Someone poured a plastic can of gas along the wall, tossed the can by the woodpile where Guillermo was sleeping, and dropped a match. The arson boys did a good job once they were motivated. Even got the ion sniffer to map the accelerant pattern. That thing sniffed out piddles and puddles all over the place, so there's not much doubt what happened."

"But Patrick was safe in his true love's arms."

"Fires have been set by hired hands before."

"I hear he had a big bill for wood he couldn't pay."

"He's pretty bitter about it. He says the country club ordered twenty new dining room tables to the tune of five grand apiece, then weaseled away. Left him holding an invoice for thirty thousand dollars. Five large ones for a dining room table. There are people with way more money than good sense."

"Any other ideas?"

"The usual ones. Somebody will get drunk and tell about the fire they set, somebody will get arrested and squeal on their friend who got drunk, a witness will return after the holidays and tell me about a one-armed man he saw running from the fire. Now go away and leave me alone. The computer gave me a list of arsonists. I have to go delegate."

"You going to question each of them personally?"

"Of course. None of the young guys in my office could find the men's room without asking. Merry Christmas."

"Happy holidays to you. If I hear anything I'll call you."

Bubba hung up and drummed the fingers of his right hand on the desk. No use doing more Christmas shopping. Kathi would be at her sister's. Elvis already had about fifty rawhide chewies. Patrick was going to get a lump of coal instead of a settlement check. Couldn't blame Arnold. It was clearly arson and you can't be encouraging the idea of fire sales. The death made it an active case of murder, and Ray would not be pleased to find Bubba's shadow across the scene. It was time to go lift weights and forget about the vagaries of life.

It was about two when Bubba returned from doing bench presses and lockouts at Big Al's Iron Works, then trampling through the

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noon buffet at the Holiday Inn. He felt ready for an afternoon's contemplation in his recliner. But as he walked down the alley to the gray metal door that was his entrance, a red Ford Explorer was parked with the engine running. Three heads were visible. Bubba recognized Willard and Carmela Cartwright in the front seats and he guessed that was Maria in the back. He waved to them and they got out.

"You open for business?" Willard asked as he shook hands with Bubba. Over the years they had had many encounters. One of the few pleasures in life that transitory citrus workers had was drinking and its resulting disturbance. Willard had vouched for many men sitting in the back of Bubba's prowl car. Men that needed to lead a pick crew the next morning rather than sit in Bartow's jail. Willard always kept his word. Men showed up in court when they needed to, clean, apologetic, and contrite, with the fine money in hand. Some of the men Bubba got to know on a first name basis. With Willard, it was always first-name basis, no matter who.

"You want to move the Explorer out to the lot or take your chances here in the alley?"

"The alley should be safe enough this close to Christmas. I know city work crews. Anyone else can just back up. Let's go."

Bubba led them into the darkness of his entranceway. He turned on the light and they went up the staircase to the second floor where repossessed furniture was stored. Mattress stacks and piles of damaged goods formed a maze leading back to Bubba's office at the front of the building. Dim and dusty, the walk quieted most clients. Bubba liked that.

Carmela, dressed in a bright skirt and contrasting blouse, sat next to Maria in her elementary school teacher's outfit on the off-white leather couch, while Willard in khakis and flannel shirt immediately found the recliner and put his feet up.

"Nice office, Bubba. I bet this chair naps real good."

"I'd be finding out if you good folks hadn't come by. What can I do for you?"

"We want you to find out who set the fire at Patrick's," Maria said.

"I'm sorry. That's an open murder investigation. I can't interfere with that. I also work for State Wide on that claim. It would be a conflict."

"But everyone thinks he did it. He's ruined," Maria answered.

"Not everyone. I don't think he did it. You three don't. Audrey is telling everyone that Patrick would rather go back to Ireland than dishonor you," Bubba said.

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"Audrey said that?" Carmela asked with her eyebrows arched in disbelief.

"I told you she liked Patrick," Maria said.

"Like a cat likes a furball!"

"Leave Audrey out of this discussion," Willard said. "Let's say I want to start a business—handmade furniture, custom cabinetwork—and I need my future partner checked out. Why his last business failed, whether he is reliable or not. Could you do that? Do that without being conflicted and confined?"

Bubba doodled on his pad for a moment. He drew a crooked chair. Finally, he said, "I don't see why not. I charge two-fifty a day plus expenses. Still want to do this?"

Willard put his hands behind his head and smiled. "There are people in this town who only know my first name and my work number. They have never seen my house or my boat or my airplane. I love to fly. Bet you didn't know that. Carmela and I keep doing this work because we like to work. But we fly our plane out to Texas to visit her side of the family six or seven times a year. The slack times in our work allow that. We go to New York City for New Year's Eve and see the shows every year. There are people in this town who spend more money than I do, but I'll never spend all mine. If I have to buy Patrick a whole new business because State Wide denies his claim, I will. Of course, I will also cancel all of my policies with State Wide and I will tell my agent why. You might mention that to your boss in claims. Yes, Bubba, I still want to do this."

Bubba nodded and filled out a standard contract while he asked questions. Maria answered most of them. Things had started to go rotten for Patrick at the beginning of the year when Artie Daniels went bankrupt and couldn't pay for all the remodeling and custom kitchen work Patrick had done. Three months' work lost. And it was a slow spring. But the country club had come to Patrick to build them an entirely new dining room set, twenty tables and chairs. The total order was nearly a hundred fifty thousand dollars.

"Then that smarmy Michael Thoms tells him that the work isn't satisfactory and cancels the order after the first table is finished. Patrick ordered wood and the bills are all past due. That's where the real trouble comes from," Maria said.

"Any reason Thoms would do this out of spite?" Bubba asked.

"We've known Michael forever. His folks own a couple of small grapefruit groves. He was always trying to date me in high school and now he thinks he's the cat's meow running the country club restaurant. But he gives me the creeps, always has," Maria said.

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"Audrey told us that the finished table just wasn't what Michael had envisioned or agreed to. That the committee in charge of the renovation concurred," Willard added.

"I guess she would know, as much time as she spends out there," Carmela said.

"Business contacts, dear. She's a high-powered realtor; she has to be friends with all kinds of people. Not all the members at the club are pigs, I'm sure," Willard said, and sat forward, the recliner clicking down.

Bubba asked where Patrick was. Maria shook her head. "He's at his place with a glass and a bottle of Jameson triple distilled. Says he needs a taste of the peat to wash the orange blossoms out of his throat."

"I'll talk to him later. Right now I'm going out to the club and see Thoms," Bubba said.

They all agreed that would be the best place to start. Willard signed the contract and gave Bubba five one-hundred-dollar bills from a wallet that didn't appear to miss them. They shook hands.

It was a quarter till four when Bubba drove the Bronco down the undulating road between the ninth and eighteenth fairways leading to the main country club building. The club and the course were built on Lake Hamilton, property that had been had for giveaway prices in the fifties. He found a place to park. The valet looked at him with careful disdain. If only he'd brought Elvis to guard the truck and howl out the window.

Bubba found Michael Thoms in his office with a stack of invoices, two yellow memo pads, a calculator, and an exasperated expression on his face. Thoms stood and offered his hand. A slender man of medium height, he wore a blue suit and white shirt, a tie filled with happy reindeer.

"What brings you out here?" he asked after indicating for Bubba to sit.

"State Wide has me checking the O'Malley fire."

"Terrible thing."

"The claim indicates all manner of exotic woods, they're called. O'Malley says they were to be tables for you. I thought I'd ask."

"Patrick overstepped his parameters. We were still deciding on whether to buy the twenty tables when he placed his order for the woods. He was quite upset when we bought just the one."

"Why not the whole twenty?"

"It was the committee's decision, not mine."

"But you, being the man with his finger on the pulse of the

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membership, would have had a big influence, I'm sure."

"Some small influence. The table had a certain style and Audrey Taylor certainly made a dynamic presentation for them. But the committee finally decided that the table was a bit too ostentatious for them."

"Too ostentatious for this bunch?"

"Want to see the table for yourself?"

They left Thoms's office, strolled down a hall off the main dining room and into a private dining room between the kitchen and bar area. A sterling silver bucket held flowers in the center of the table. Bubba walked around the table and looked at it. Then, he stood there. The room was quiet; with the door closed, the bustle of the bar and kitchen vanished. The table gleamed in light from a northern exposure window. Bubba frowned and walked over to where Thoms was leaning against the door frame. He stopped inches from Thoms, well inside his personal space.

"Bullshit," Bubba said.

"What do you mean? Back off, Simms."

"I'm just a dumb, old retired cop. I don't know a thing about dynamic presentation or style, but this is the bestlooking piece of furniture in this place. I bet this room stays booked since this table was placed here."

"The decisions of the committee are none of your concern."

There were times when being twice as big as the other person made a difference. Bubba leaned closer and stared into Michael Thoms's eyes. Something scurried there.

"Like I said, I don't know anything about furniture or style, but I got a lifetime of smelling lies and schemes. What's going on, Mikey? I don't usually like to hurt people just before Christmas, but people fall down, accidents happen. What's going on?"

"Leave me alone, before I have you thrown out."

Bubba smiled his best bad-cop smile. He gently patted Thoms's cheek. "What's going on? What was the plan? Why mess with O'Malley?"

Bubba could see the resistance fading; Thoms was used to going along with others. Country club managers were not hired for their fierce independence. Besides, Bubba had met him when he was still Mikey Thoms, riding around with the other underaged drinkers. Bubba had let them go with a warning, but it had been a scary warning that stuck. Thoms's eyes dropped.

"Ask Audrey. If there's a plan, she has it. I did what she asked. Just a little reservation in my report. I was happy to do it. I agreed with her about O'Malley."

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"What about O'Malley?"

"Some scruffy foreigner has no business marrying her sister."

Bubba found Audrey's husband, K. C. Taylor, sitting on a comfortable stool at the Elks Club bar in downtown Winter Haven. K. C. was easy to locate from five to seven in the evenings. Bubba perched on the stool next to him. K. C. smiled at him.

"What are you drinking, Bubba? First one's on me."

"I just want to ask you something."

"It's after five. I don't have to answer any questions without a drink. What will you have?"

"If you insist, a Jameson then."

"Ah, it's O'Malley then, you've come about." Taylor called the bartender over and gave him Bubba's order, and made room on the bar for another double Dewar's for himself.

"What do you know about O'Malley?"

"I like him. He drinks me under the table and can build anything made out of wood. Audrey hates his guts. Of course, I've let down the image over the years so Audrey hates my guts too, so that doesn't make him special. Why are you asking?"

"Looking into the fire for State Wide. Thought maybe you'd heard something I ought to know."

"Audrey is humming a pleasant tune these last few days. She thinks he's through and headed back to Ireland."

"Maria plans on marrying Patrick."

"Better check with Audrey about that. She's the one who makes decisions. I had the feeling that Patrick might be in trouble jail-wise. Arson and all that."

"No, Maria vouches for his whereabouts when the fire started. So everyone else is a suspect. Where were you, K. C.?"

"I'm not telling. But Audrey was taking a shower when I eased in a bit after five that morning. She must have already had ten cups of coffee. She was wound tighter than a drum. Like she really cared where I had been. In fact, she would have been angrier if she knew I was asleep on the couch in our little real estate office. Better place to sleep than our damn house most nights. I can't set a glass on a coaster because it will ruin the decor. Bartender, another Jameson and some young Dewar's for me."

"This one's enough for me."

"Damn you, Bubba Simms. Sit there and drink. If I were as big as you, I'd drink this place dry. Your wife's in Atlanta, mine's insane. Let's be Irishmen for an evening. Go call that runt

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O'Malley and have him give us instructions."

Bubba woke with Elvis standing on his chest alternating friendly licks with howls. It was past time to go outside. Bubba sat up and tried to hack the wad of moss out of his throat. Failing that, he wandered through the house until he found the back door and let Elvis out. After he brushed his teeth and started the coffee, he remembered the Bronco. It wasn't in the driveway. Thank goodness he'd had sense enough to call a cab. Surely K. C. hadn't driven him home. He went back to the bathroom and took four aspirin.

After he let Elvis back in and fed him, Bubba drank a cup of coffee. He was starting to feel better. With a second cup of coffee in hand, he punched the buttons on the answering machine. Two offers to install siding on his house, Ray Bisse said to call, and Kathi wished him a Merry Christmas. She wanted to tell him that the package for their nephews had arrived and that it was sweet of him to think of them. That he should have a nice Christmas Day and she was going up into the hills north of Atlanta, Raban County to be exact, to be by herself and do some sketching. Bubba saved the message.

He showered and shaved, took a cab back downtown, picked up the Bronco, and was at the office by ten. A message from Arnold said to call him. He called.

"Got your report. Concise as usual. Anything else to add?" Arnold asked.

"Willard Cartwright says you better treat O'Malley right or he'll drop State Wide as his insurer."

"Tell me something I don't know. The VP for recurring sales had memo-itis all afternoon. When they find out who set the fire, we'll pay the claim. Tell them that. Go watch your dog."

Bubba listened to the buzz of the phone for a moment before he punched in Ray's number.

"Any progress on the O'Malley fire?" Bubba asked.

"What size shoes do you wear?"

"Thirteens. Why?"

"I want to knit you a pair of booties for Christmas. Besides, I'm finding footprints all over my investigation, so I wanted to eliminate all the usual suspects first. Take a drive to Atlanta, stay out of my business."

"I'm helping the family out. They want to know why Patrick's business went in the dumper."

"Any ideas?"

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"Bad luck and having the wrong kind of friends."

"Anything concerning the fire?"

"Not yet, you'll be the first to know. But I need to ask you a question about that sniffer the lab boys use."

"Forget it. I'll transfer you down to the crime scene techs. Let them talk alpha particles to you. Want to come over to the house for Christmas dinner?"

"I'll let you know."

After Bubba finished his conversation with the tech, he put his boots up on the desk and thought. Finally, he made a call to Audrey but only got her voice mail. He told her to meet him at the fire site in two hours. Then he went home and fed Elvis. Eventually they made the drive to the remains of O'Malley's Woodworks.

They were wandering around, Bubba looking and Elvis sniffing, when Audrey Taylor arrived. She exited the Town Car wearing a black and white pantsuit and patent leather high heels. The day was warm enough that she didn't need a jacket but she draped a black shawl over one shoulder. Bubba and Elvis waited near where the body had been found. Audrey briskly walked up to them, a Styrofoam cup of coffee in her hand.

"What's going on? Why all the questioning about me?" she asked.

"Elvis and I are doing what we do best, sniffing out clues."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Did you know that the crime scene technicians have a device that they use at a fire to find out what started it? That they can tell gasoline from kerosene from diesel from benzene just by taking air samples after the fire is over?"

"So what?"

"Elvis is like that too." Bubba bent down and patted the asphalt surface. "Smell," he said. Elvis put his nose down to the ground, then Bubba said, "Find." Elvis put his nose in the air and moved toward Audrey. "Luckily," Bubba said, "with this cold weather it hasn't rained or even had a heavy dew since the fire. Elvis's nose is probably even stronger than their device." Elvis walked slowly toward Audrey, his tail wagging.

"Did Guillermo Guzman try to get out of the fire, is that what made you wet yourself that morning?" Bubba asked.

"Who? What? Call your dog back, I'm not having another outfit ruined by him."

"Elvis, heel. Guzman is the illegal who burned up, passed out drunk, more than likely. Or was it just the sight of all that flame that excited you too much?"

"I didn't set any fire. Yes, I'm glad that this place burned down.

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Now that Irish bum can go home and leave my sister to have a decent life."

"Maria loves Patrick."

"Love those big, dirty hands? Those work clothes, those scuffed shoes? That beat-up truck? I don't think so. She's enthralled with his mystique, his exoticness. But she'll forget him and find a real husband and join me in Winter Haven society." Audrey stepped closer to Bubba with each sentence. By the time she finished she was close, too close for proper etiquette.

"Your parents are willing to build Patrick a new shop."

"Those fools." Her voice was low, harsh. Bubba could see the blending of her makeup, the tight line of her chin. "What do they understand? My mother still dresses like it's fiesta day and my father would be happy in yard sale remnants. He could be someone in this town. But they choose to be jokes. They would love to keep my sister down there with them."

"You'd kill so your sister would be Junior League?"

"Who killed? But if that was what it took, I'd do what I needed to." Her hand reached for Bubba's cheek and pulled him toward her. He tasted coffee on her tongue. Then, he straightened his neck and lifted away from her.

"I don't look good in a suit either," he said.

She laughed and released him. "Is that your spot where everyone is going to sniff?" she asked, looking down. Then she poured the cup of coffee across the asphalt. "Your hound might still smell something but I don't believe for a minute that the Polk County Sheriff's Department could."

She turned and walked away, a gentle sway in her hips, the shawl hanging free down her back. Bubba and Elvis looked at each other and followed along.

"You headed home, Audrey?"

"Yes, time to change. I have a party to go to." She glanced over her shoulder.

"When you run your card through the Briarwood gate release tonight, think about the high maintenance fees you pay and how you have a state-of-the-art system to protect you from all those other people. Then start thinking about how to explain your leaving and entering the gate the other morning at four A.M. Should make a compelling tale. . . . And one more thing, Audrey."

She stopped at her Town Car and looked at Bubba with a faint smile and a shake of her head. "What else?"

Bubba held up a plastic sample bag containing asphalt crumblings.

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"Even the Polk County lab should be able to identify this. Pee in a cup, Audrey."

"Funny, but I'd never spend a day in jail and you know it. You've got nothing."

"I have enough to tell a really funny story at Happ's to the early morning citrus crowd about a clumsy bitch killing some dumb fruitpicker and then pissing all over herself. How many houses do you think you're ever going to list again? How many committees will ever listen to you? You better enjoy that party tonight. There won't be many more. You know how careful society is about who it allows."

The bones seemed to stretch the skin of her face. Then she was in the car and the door shutting.

"I give you until noon tomorrow to call Detective Bisse, then I will," Bubba said.

The following morning was Christmas Eve. Bubba decided that if he put up a tree Elvis would probably mistake it for an indoor marking station, so they had extra bacon for breakfast instead. There was no answer at the Cartwrights' office. He left a message on Willard's voice mail but by noon no one had called him back. So he drove to the Cartwrights' home. They lived south of Winter Haven on Eagle Lake. The house had been added to several times over the years and was now a pale yellow ranch style with two wings on the back. Carmela answered the door wiping her hands on a dishtowel and invited Bubba in.

"Willard didn't answer my messages so I thought I'd drop by."

"Someone should have called you. My apologies. Would you like some cookies and coffee? How silly, of course you would. Follow me to the kitchen. I'm baking." She seated Bubba at an alcove off the kitchen. She brought a plate of iced sugar cookies and a cup of coffee. He declined cream and sugar.

"My husband has flown to Texas to visit some of our relatives. My aunt and uncle have a ranch between San Antonio and El Paso."

"I wanted to talk to y'all about what I learned."

"Audrey went with him. He'll be back to go to New York City for New Year's Eve."

"Audrey?"

"She is going to visit for a time. Take a rest. Be in touch with her roots, as they say. Willard finally listened to me."

"It's not that simple, someone died."

"Did I tell you that Patrick and Maria set the date? Second

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weekend in April. By then his new shop will be open." She pushed the half-emptied plate closer to him.

"But someone died."

"How do you know someone died?"

"I saw the body."

"Is your wife Kathi still alive?" Bubba nodded. "You don't see her, but you know she lives. Guillermo worked for us many times. He sent money back to his family in Honduras every month. They live well, even on his tidbits. He was illiterate so he hired someone to write them letters on the holidays. He loved them, but loved beer even more, I think. They will receive their money and a lovely Christmas letter. I am sure they're glad he is alive and working hard in the USA. Do you wish to tell them different? I have the address of their village."

"I am having Christmas dinner with Detective Bisse. What do I tell him?"

"How lucky it is for you to have a true friend. True friends and family are what matter. You have a bag of something which might or might not be important. You have a very clever theory. But enough to send a person to prison? A beautiful, well-dressed woman, with wealthy parents who can hire the best lawyers, to prison? No! But enough to send her to the scrublands of Texas for a long time? Yes! Is that not justice?" Carmela stood and brushed her apron. She walked over to the counter and began to chop celery.

Bubba finished the last cookie without speaking. The coffee was lukewarm so he left it. Finally, he stood. Carmela hugged him and lifted a decorative can off the counter as they walked out of the warm kitchen. "Take these cookies to Detective Bisse. Eat them together and be glad you are not alone at Christmas."

As Bubba drove away, he glanced at the bag of asphalt particles on the passenger seat. Arnold was going to be pleased to not pay a big claim. Audrey was going away for a long time. Patrick and Maria would live down the gossip, especially if he continued to make his furniture for those who could afford it. A Honduran village would have a hero.

Bubba wondered if the Briarwood security system actually recorded the comings and goings of its residents; he'd have to check on that sometime. Halfway home, he decided to stop at the ABC liquor store. It was Christmas Eve, time to show Bisse how to be an Irishman, even for just a little while.

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UNCLE HAROLD

PERCY SPURLARK PARKER

I hung up when the answering machine came on. I needed to talk to my lawyer, not a damn recorder. How the hell could I tell a machine I'd just killed my uncle?

The police would think it was premeditated. It would be an easy jump for them since my uncle and I have had a number of public shouting matches lately. We were equal owners in a small chain of novelty stores. My mother has been dead for several years and with me being the only offspring, I inherited all my father's shares when he passed six months ago. That put me into a fifty percent ownership bracket and a head-to-head conflict with my uncle.

I've always liked the money the company generated, but I never wanted anything to do with the business. It wasn't a secret the way I felt. My dad had blown a couple of gaskets trying to get me interested in the business. I guess willing me his shares was a last-ditch effort. Anyway, when Starland Novelties approached me with an offer, I was all for it. But Starland wanted sole ownership, not just my half.

And Uncle Harold said no.

Our first public blowout was in our office cafeteria at the tail end of the first-tier lunch break. We put on quite a show for the few employees still in the room. Uncle Harold pounded on the table, his thin face reddening. "Your father and I didn't start this company for you to just up and give it away."

"We can clear a mil and a half each. That's not giving anything away."

"You've never understood, Tom," Uncle Harold said. He had basset hound eyes, the kind that sag at the outer corners, making his thin face look longer than it was. "There's more than just our own well-being to think of. There's our employees, our customers."

I looked around the cafeteria to the wide eyes staring at us.

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"Starland is a better outfit than we'll ever be. The employees will be better off, and so will we."

"No."

It had gone like that for two weeks. I'd come up with a logical reason to sell, and he would simply strike it down with another no.

"There's no sane reason for you not to sell," I told him this morning in his office.

He was sitting behind his desk. His thin jaws relaxed somewhat. "Tom, you've never given the business a chance. Your father dreamed of you joining the company, taking over for both of us when we retired."

"It's not my dream, Uncle."

He nodded, slouching somewhat in his chair. "And what is your dream, Tom? Women? Parties? It's all I've ever known you to be interested in."

"I don't find anything wrong with that," I said, feeling a smile creep into my expression.

"I won't allow it."

"Look, either you agree to sell, or I'll do everything in my power to ruin this company." I was tired of trying to reason with him. "We're equal partners. I'll countermand every order you give. Tie up payroll, inflate inventories, whatever it takes."

"You wouldn't dare. I'll take you to court."

"Fine. That'll screw things up even more."

Uncle Harold shook his head. "You'd actually do this?"

I had to make a stand. Starland wasn't going to keep their offer on the table forever. "If I can't have my way, I promise I won't let you have yours."

He didn't say anything for what seemed like an awfully long time. Then he said, "I'm going to have to think about this, Tom. Really give it some deep thought. You are serious, aren't you?"

"That's what I've been saying all along."

He wiped his face with both hands. "Can we talk later? How about my place, about eight?"

There wasn't much fight left in his voice. I didn't know if he believed I would ruin the company, or if I actually could, for that matter. But there was no questioning the fact that I could inflict some major damage.

I had a date lined up for tonight, but I said, "Eight will be fine."

My uncle had gotten out of the city years ago, moving high up into the California hills. He joked at being able to see the smog

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much better from up there. The road is narrow and winding, and it can get pretty tricky during bad weather. Tonight, however, it was clear, and traveling up the steep inclines was fairly easy.

When I pulled into the driveway the garage door was wide open. Uncle Harold was there, his shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows, as he worked under the hood of his prized '59 Chevy. It was candy apple red in color; the body and chrome shined as if it had just come off the assembly line.

"They don't make 'em like this anymore," he said, as I got out of my car.

"Accept Starland's offer and you can buy yourself a dozen of these toys to play with."

He nodded, a half-hearted frown on his face. "Go on in and make yourself a drink, Tom. I won't be much longer."

Uncle Harold never married and his house has a predominant male flair—lots of wood paneling, dark carpeting, and a massive oak desk in his study. I made my way to the study where he also kept a small bar and fixed myself a bourbon with a splash of seltzer.

I was on my second drink when he finally showed, wiping his hands on an oil-stained rag. He dropped the rag on the bar, poured himself some sherry, and asked, "Have you given any thought to reconsidering your threat?"

"What?"

"I was hoping that being away from the office, the added time to think about what you were doing . . . you might just change your mind."

"You got me up here for this?"

"I had to give it a try, Tom."

"You're a damn fool."

"Tom, please . . ."

"Buy me out, then. You can have the company all to yourself. Pay me what Starland's offering and you won't be bothered with me anymore."

"You know that's not feasible."

"And I know you're in for a war."

"I can't let that happen, Tom," he said, looking directly at me. "I am capable of stopping you, you know. Don't make me."

I'd never thought I had a quick temper, but I felt the anger rise in me. He was just jerking me around, and I'd had enough. I finished my drink and slammed the glass on the counter, but I wanted to wrap my hands around his thin, wrinkled throat.

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"You're going to lose everything," I shouted, heading for the door.

"No, wait," he said, grabbing my arm. "Let's try to talk this out."

I pulled my arm free and used both hands to push him away as he groped for me again. If he'd kept coming I would've swung on him, my fists were clenched and at the ready, but he stumbled backward, tripped, and fell. I heard a deep smack as his head collided with the corner of his desk.

It didn't take a medical degree to know he was dead. He lay on the floor by the desk, his head at an awkward angle, a pool of blood rapidly growing on the carpet.

I guess that's when I panicked and tried to call my lawyer, getting his answering machine instead. After I allowed myself to relax, I realized my problems were solved. I was the sole owner of the company now, there was nothing stopping me from selling. In hindsight it was a good thing I hadn't been able to reach my lawyer.

Okay, so Uncle Harold's death had been an accident. Even with a little help from me, it had still been an accident. He could easily have caused it himself. All I had to do was to get rid of any sign that I'd been here tonight. My fingerprints would be throughout the house, but he was my uncle so that shouldn't cause any eyebrows to raise. The glass would be the only thing I had to concern myself about. I cleaned it and put it back with the others on the shelf behind the bar. Then I untied one of Uncle Harold's shoelaces just to help the accident theory along. I took a moment to assess everything, feeling genuinely pleased with myself for coming up with the bit about the shoelace.

I got in my car and started down the road back to the city. Everything was going to work out just fine. I'd have to wait a decent interval before contacting Starland Novelties . . . Tomorrow afternoon should be long enough. I almost laughed out loud. I was feeling better than I'd felt in quite some time.

I eased on the brakes as I approached the first sharp bend in the road. It wasn't until then that I realized why Uncle Harold sent me into the house first.

"I'm capable of stopping you." His words came back to me as the brake pedal went all the way to the floor.

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THE OTHER BONDSMAN

R. T. LAWTON

"The lawmakers and economists of our great country . . ."

Cletis Johnston, proprietor of the Twin Brothers Bail Bond Company, paced slowly back and forth in front of the rich mahogany desk in his private executive office as he continued to expound on the current company crisis.

". . . believe that competition strengthens the marketplace, while I . . ."

His hands were clasped carefully behind his back so as not to wrinkle the fabric of his new shantung silk suit—which was in a shade of black to match his midnight skin, shaved bald head, and black silky bandido mustache. A black shirt and silk tie completed the ensemble.

The way Theodore saw it, they looked like funeral colors.

". . . agree with old man Rockefeller, the Hunts, and several other billionaires that a monopoly is just good business for the man who is shrewd enough to arrange one in his field of endeavor. Wouldn't you agree?"

Theodore Oscar Alan Dewey, bail agent for the bonding company, who had found himself relegated to a chair in the middle of the room, nodded his round white balding head in acquiescence. For the past several minutes his bulbous eyes had swiveled from side to side, carefully following the pacing of Mr. Johnston on the expensive oriental carpet. But mostly Theodore had been wondering why in the world he had been allowed to sit in a chair in the inner sanctum. It was the first time in his ten years with the company that the proprietor had not made him stand for the duration of their meeting. Theodore therefore assumed it would be a long meeting and the chair was to keep him from becoming too tired to pay the appropriate attention. Thus, with renewed concentration, he tried to figure out where

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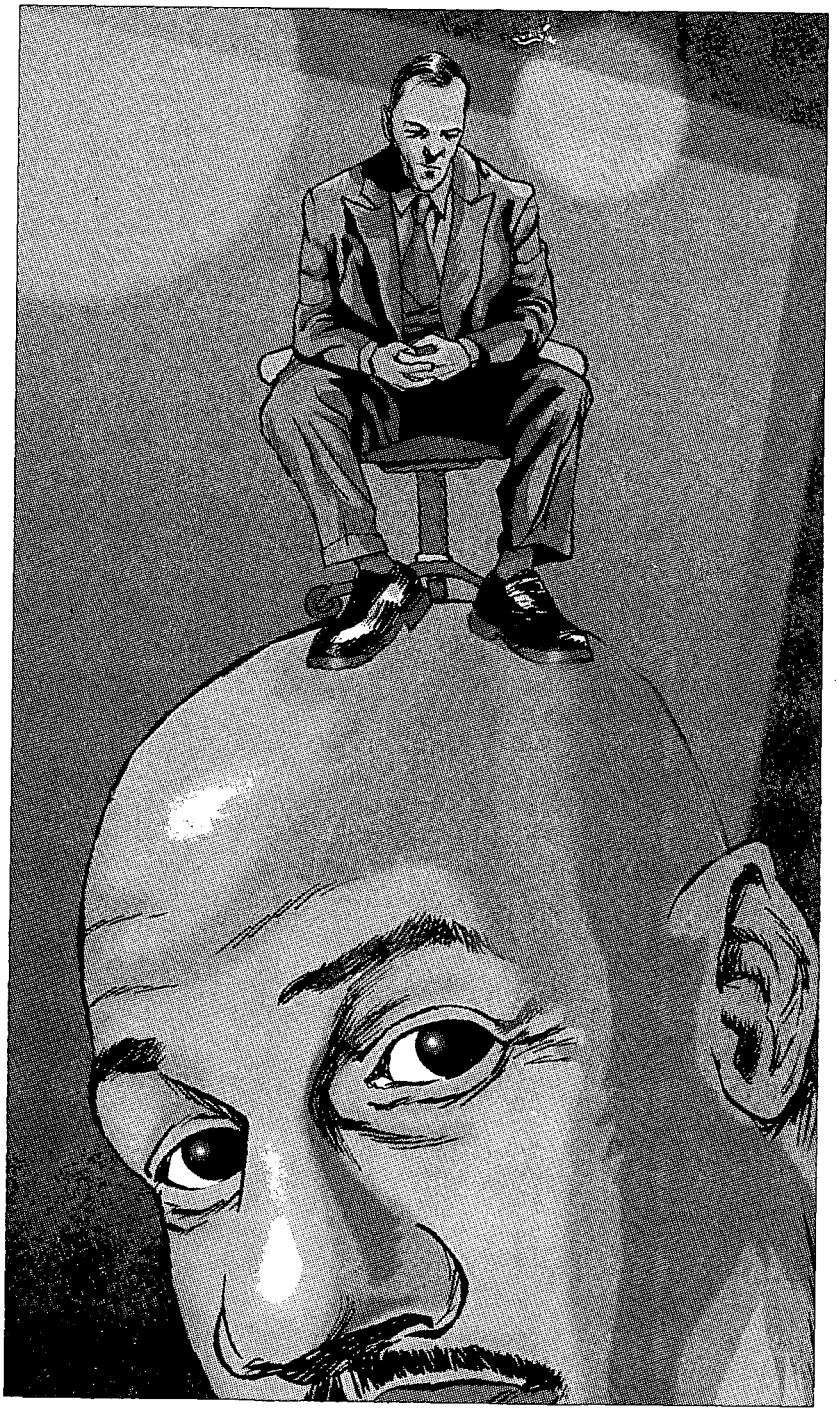

M.K. Perker

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Mr. Johnston was going with this conversation.

"Recent developments have disclosed," continued Cletis, "that we now have a new competitor in our bail bond business."

Afraid that he had missed an important point somewhere and not wanting to be caught short if he did, Theodore ventured a statement, which ended in a question.

"Excuse me for saying so, sir, but we already have a dozen bail bond companies operating in the Bay City area, so what's one more?"

Cletis paused in his pacing and turned to stare into the eyes of his minion.

"Sometimes I doubt the value of retaining your services much further into the twenty-first century. What I've been referring to is not the business of bonding out a common street criminal as do all the other companies, but rather the bonding of those *special* clients where our abnormally high profit margin comes into play."

"Oh," replied Theodore, who then shuddered slightly inside as he remembered those that fell from the sky, were struck by speeding taxicabs, got shot by their partners in crime, or were otherwise disposed of in some violent manner. Yet somehow it seemed that one way or another, the company always managed to receive a substantial and lucrative fee from the deceased, or about to be deceased, for the agreed-upon bail bond business that had been conducted. *"Those* clients."

Cletis resumed his pacing and expounding.

"There are only so many special clients to go around and I fear that another bondsman has infringed into our private niche in the bonding world. As our street gangs across the bay so eloquently put it, 'they has invaded *our turf* and must be dealt with severely.' "

At this point, as usually happened in these types of meetings with the proprietor, Theodore felt a sudden sharp pain in his stomach. Surreptitiously, while trying to maintain the outward appearance of total absorption in the alleged crisis, he slipped a bottle of antacid pills out of his pocket and popped the lid with his thumb. Shaking two tablets into his palm, Theodore replaced the bottle in his plaid sport coat pocket and waited until Mr. Johnston had reached the halfway point in his pacing and was now headed in the direction of the far wall.

As Mr. Johnston's back seemed appropriately going away, Theodore grasped the tablets by the thumb and forefinger of his stubby, almost-webbed left hand and quickly thrust the tablets into his mouth. The surreptitious effect was spoiled when Cletis turned abruptly to emphasize a point in his speech. Thus,

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Theodore was caught with thumb and forefinger touching his lips just below his pencil-thin mustache, while his left little finger, the one with the two-carat pinky ring, stuck straight out as if he were a guest at a formal high tea. It seems that Theodore's left pinky had once been broken and improperly set, therefore it was now permanently rigid and served as a reminder of things one should not do in the future.

Cletis held up on the point he was about to make.

"Are you paying attention to anything I've said?"

"Yes sir, it's just that my ulcer was acting up. But I've honestly heard every word."

Without the display of any emotion, Cletis stared into Theodore's eyes momentarily before returning behind his desk and taking a seat in his leather executive chair. Abruptly, he continued as if the aberration had been forgotten.

"I've felt, for some time now, that all is not well in our business. The facts were right there in our city's newspaper. All one had to do was read the reports of high-dollar criminals meeting their sudden demise while out on bond, followed shortly thereafter by their entire estate being forfeited in the courts to the Morden Bail Bond Company."

Cletis pinched the bridge of his nose in apparent contemplation or perhaps an impending migraine. Theodore couldn't tell which, but he listened carefully in case he was suddenly called on again as the proprietor continued speaking.

"I firmly believe the owner of that company is stealing our best potential clients, and as you well know, our business is risky enough as it is without some outsider barging in. There is no room for competition in this type of bond, and it is definitely not a healthy situation for either of us, regardless of what the government says about a free market."

At the negative mention of a healthy situation, Theodore began to feel a more intense pain in his stomach.

"What did you have in mind, sir?"

"First, we need to determine how the other bondsman happened onto the same scheme we're using. Was it chance, personal nefariousness, or does he have his own intelligence system gazing at us under a magnifying glass?"

The proprietor took this moment to lean forward in an ominous manner.

"Tell me, Theodore, have you spoken of our business to anyone?"

Theodore instinctively covered his left pinky finger and wished he were elsewhere.

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"Only about the bonding part when I visit the prospective clients in jail and explain the special terms of the contract, but never do I discuss our full procedure."

"How about to some young lady you might be trying to impress in a bar before closing time?"

Theodore took time to mop his perspiring crown with a white-on-white silk handkerchief.

"No sir, you warned me about that sort of thing. And I don't date much."

"Maybe a few words to your mother in a weak moment of contrition?"

"No sir, she's been deceased for more than a year now."

"Ah. My condolences."

"Thank you, sir."

With amenities out of the way, the interrogation returned in force.

"Perhaps under the effects of alcohol you let slip a few indiscrete sentences to a drinking companion?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Johnston. After working with you in this business, I'm too paranoid to have more than one drink with anyone."

"Good, Theodore, good. I'm merely trying to eliminate certain options."

Cletis gazed up at the ceiling as if gathering his thoughts.

Theodore remained rooted to the chair, waiting for the next question.

"Have you noticed anyone following you lately? Discussed our procedures out loud with yourself when you thought you were alone? Made written notes of any of our transactions?"

"No, no, and no. I'm more careful than that, sir."

"Then it is worse than I feared, but not as bad as it could have been."

"How do you mean, it's worse?"

"Having eliminated the obvious, I surmise that our opponent must have a vast intellect and a scheming mind. Bad traits in our competition."

"Then what did you mean by not as bad as it could have been?"

"Think about it, Theodore, if the owner of the Morden Bail Bond Company had learned of our special techniques by conducting physical and electronic surveillance on us, then he knows exactly who we are and how we operate. He might even have pondered the possibility of purging his competition. Did you consider those ramifications?"

Theodore preferred not to let his overactive imagination dwell

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on such consequences, but found he was torn between the fleeting hope that the proprietor would have a brilliant plan to get them out of this mess, and the sinking surety that said plan would involve perilous action on the part of himself.

"What do we do now, sir?"

"Do, Theodore? I've already taken the first steps. Two days ago, I had a communications security specialist sweep this entire office for eavesdropping devices. Yesterday, he cleared my residence and that of the firm's new executive secretary, Moklal Feringheea."

This reference to the tall, silent Hindu who had insinuated himself into the vacant secretary position upon the demise of old Henry, the prior keeper of the firm's secrets, now caused Theodore the extra momentary discomfort of a shudder crawling down his back. As far as Theodore was concerned, there were still some questions to be answered about the strange deaths or sudden alleged departures of the other job candidates at the top of the hiring list, in which case, Theodore couldn't quit thinking about the cadaverous Hindu's strong hands and long sinuous fingers. Besides, he only believed in coincidences when they worked in behalf of his own personal favor.

"Excuse me, sir, but does the Thuggee . . . I mean to say, Mr. Feringheea, know you had his place searched?"

"Theodore, no one is above suspicion in our business, but yes, I did inform him when he showed up for work yesterday morning that the electronic sweep was being conducted even as we spoke."

"How'd he take it?"

"That's of no importance. Feringheea is merely an employee of the firm, much like you, Theodore. And, he is only here now because my twin brother offered him employment, unbeknownst to me, shortly before my brother moved on . . . shall we say . . . to a different environment."

"That's a polite euphemism, sir. One I haven't heard you use before."

"Careful with your tongue, Theodore."

"Sorry, sir."

The proprietor arched one eyebrow before continuing.

"And at present, the security specialist is conducting a sweep on your apartment."

Theodore tried to remember if any important or embarrassing items had remained in plain view when he left his apartment this morning before breakfast.

"Excuse me, Mr. Johnston, but I did double-lock my front door. Do you want me to go home and let him in?"

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"I don't believe that will be necessary. With this specialist's varied background, and considering the agency that employed him before he was forcibly retired, he won't have any problem opening your door. Now, may I proceed?"

Theodore nodded.

"I also engaged the services of a private investigative firm to quietly check out our Mr. Morden. It seems that Herr Morden is of East German lineage, has spent much of his later life in the Slavic states, and recently found a pressing need to leave that area of the world when a certain dictator was arrested for alleged war crimes. I assume you keep up with the news?"

"I try, sir, I try."

"In any case, we need to figure out what his next move will be and beat him to it."

Theodore tentatively raised one hand.

"Yes, Theodore, you have an idea?"

"Just a thought, sir, but if he's not hurting us too badly, can't we just leave him alone or even inform him that he's cutting into our business and then make a pact of some kind?"

The almost oriental features of Cletis's eyes narrowed until there was absolutely no white showing in either eye socket, leaving only what appeared to be the icy black pupil and iris.

"I have no intention of letting an outsider into our private monopoly just so we can form a cartel. Have you already forgotten that he may not want any competition? It's wiser that we remain in the shadows on the off chance that he's not yet totally aware of us and our special methods."

"Point taken, sir. What do you think his next move will be?"

Cletis leaned back in his executive chair and ran his thumb and forefinger down one side of his long, drooping mustache.

"Yesterday in state court, our Herr Morden put up an extremely high-dollar bail bond for Lester Cantrell, a reputed assassin for hire. Lester had the misfortune of being identified as the shooter in a specific gangland slaying. It seems he left an eyewitness at the scene."

The proprietor momentarily stopped caressing his mustache.

"Let that be a constant reminder to us all."

"Amen," chimed in Theodore.

The proprietor continued.

"But now that Lester is on the outside, I have no doubt that the eyewitness will cease to be a problem to him. However, Lester will probably be required to pay a price of some sort for this posting of his high bond. And I therefore theorize that as part of the price Herr Morden desires someone else terminated, for reasons of his own."

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"You don't think that someone else is us, do you?"

"No, not really. Since the security specialist has yet to find any 'bugs' and neither of us has noticed any surveillance on our movements, I believe we are in the clear for now."

"What if we were being followed and didn't realize it?"

"I already thought of that, therefore I had the detective agency conduct counter-surveillance on us for the last two days. Nothing there."

Theodore had to think about that for a while.

"So what you're saying, sir, is that I've been followed by people checking to see if people were following me and I didn't see any of them?"

"Yes, Theodore. May we get back to the problem now?"

Theodore bobbed his pale head. He was still considering this revelation, but at the same time was almost overwhelmed with the urge to look over his shoulder, even though he knew it was just the two of them inside the executive office. At least he assumed so.

Cletis went on.

"The best I can come up with, at the moment, for a possible assassination target is the secretary general of the United Nations. The secretary general will be in town tomorrow night for a meeting concerning the ongoing Bosnian and Macedonian situations, and since Herr Morden had such a hasty departure from said area, I surmise he has an axe to grind."

"You're probably right, boss. So how do we handle it?"

"*We*? So far I've done all the work. Now it's your turn."

This was the part that Theodore dreaded; somehow it always came down to him in the frying pan. His head dropped.

"Tell me what I got to do."

"Very simple, Theodore. Every afternoon, including Saturdays, Lester Cantrell has to show up in person at the Court Services Office to ensure that he hasn't departed for South America or other parts unknown. I can arrange for him to sit in their outer office for several hours. While he's absent from his apartment, you will go through his place and search all of his belongings. If my sources are correct, there should be a small safe hidden under the floor of his bedroom closet. I believe we may find some documents or information there we can use to our benefit."

"Why me, Mr. Johnston? Why not send Feringheea? He's always suddenly appearing right behind me in the office and I never hear him coming. He'd be perfect for this job."

"No, Theodore, at this point I don't trust that man to work alone

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on our behalf. There's no telling what orders my long estranged, now missing brother gave him. I'd rather keep the Hindu close at hand where I can watch him, see what he's up to."

"Then how about using one of our pet burglars to toss Cantrell's place."

Cletis reached into the credenza behind him and drew out a miniature camera.

"I'm afraid we can't do that, Theodore, because after our last operation, we are fresh out of living burglars. Now go do your part."

Cletis set the camera on the front edge of his executive mahogany desk where Theodore could reach it.

"Put everything back in the exact same place you found it," Cletis cautioned, "but don't be afraid to take lots of pictures of anything important that you might find. Now go. Lester will be leaving his apartment in the next half hour and I've got important calls to make."

Five hours later, Theodore returned to the office with a package of photos from a one-hour developing service down the block. As he closed the front door to the firm, he noticed that the executive secretary's room right outside the inner sanctum was now empty. Obviously, the Hindu Thuggee was off on an errand for the proprietor.

Seeing this as his big chance to find out what the quiet Hindu was really up to, Theodore moved quickly around the desk and started opening the drawers. Pens, blank white paper, staple puller, paper clips, file folders, a nasty looking pair of scissors . . . Theodore opened the scissors and checked the blades for dried blood. None. Disgusted, he replaced them in the drawer and closed it.

It was in the last drawer that he came across the silk scarves. They nestled in several bright colors at the back of the drawer. Most of the scarves seemed to be in shades of yellow. And each scarf had a knot tied in their opposite ends. Gingerly, Theodore picked up one of the yellow scarves.

"I see you are a connoisseur of good silk," came the deep voice over Theodore's shoulder. "Shall we see how it looks around your neck?"

Theodore dropped the scarf.

"Don't kill me. I don't want to die."

He quickly scooted around to the other side of the desk to put himself as far out of harm's reach as possible.

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"Ah, but Mr. Dewey," replied the Hindu, "the Mahatma himself said that 'Death is as necessary for man's growth as life itself.' Wouldn't you like to grow a little . . . taller?"

"I'm sure the guy you're quoting didn't mean me as the growing man. Besides, I was just looking for something to write with. I got a very important meeting with the proprietor, you know. And he's probably waiting for me right now."

The Hindu procured a ball point pen from the middle desk drawer and held it out.

"Then you shouldn't keep him waiting, should you?"

Theodore grabbed the pen and took three sideways steps closer to the door leading into the inner sanctum. With his hand safely on the door handle, he narrowed his bulbous eyes as best he could and hissed at the new executive secretary.

"Tell me the truth, Mr. Moklal Feringheea. What are you really doing here?"

The Hindu put a cold smile on his face.

"In the words of the Mahatma, 'One's life is not a single straight line; it is a bundle of duties very often conflicting. And one is called upon continually to make one's choice between one duty and another.' What about you, Mr. Dewey. What choices do you have to make in this business you're in?"

"That's none of your business, I can tell you." And Theodore moved quickly into the inner sanctum.

He found Cletis calmly waiting for the package, but there was no longer any chair in the middle of the room for Theodore to sit. Perhaps this would be a shorter meeting. He partially relaxed at the thought.

"Any trouble getting in?"

"Not really." Theodore chuckled with self-satisfaction now that his part of the mission was over. "I'm a little rusty at picking locks, but then Lester's so stupid that he left the key over the front door."

"Which fits in with the report from the detective agency," added Cletis. "They said Lester's military record showed he never received rank any higher than private first class even after ten years of service. Seems he was good at marching, excellent at sniper school, and dumber than a rock at everything else. He didn't work well with others, so the Army finally kicked him out."

"That explains the rifle, scope, and tripod I found in a case in his bedroom closet. He evidently brings his work home with him."

"Speaking of the closet, did you locate the safe?"

"In the floor right where you said it was, but locked up solid.

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You know how some people leave the dial in a position with just the last number of the combination to go and then it's open? Not him."

"What brand is the safe?"

"It's a Poulard. You've probably seen their ads for pickproof door locks. I can tell you we ain't getting into that safe without the combination or maybe some C-4."

Cletis steepled his fingers.

"As weak minded as Lester is, he probably keeps the combination close to the safe. What did you find for paperwork?"

Theodore carefully spread the photos out on the desktop. Finally he picked one in particular.

"The place was pretty devoid of documents or paper of any kind, but I did find this one notebook page lying inside the gun case in the closet."

He turned the photo around and slid it across to the proprietor. The photo of the document read:

510-555-7236
4/3/2/1
38 Ruger
45 Colt
12 Remington
6 Hi Standard

1733	2814
4028	3113
2916	4325
2105	1827
10,782	2,079

"You know, it's a common practice amongst many people to attempt the deception of others by concealing important strings of numbers within a mass of other numerals," said Cletis. "That way all numbers look equally normal. Some people even make them appear to be phone numbers. Others make them look like simple addition. Personally, I believe the combination to the safe is on this piece of paper. We only need to deduce the method of concealment."

"That could be, sir, so I spent three hours trying out various combinations of those numbers. None of them worked."

"You said it is a Poulard safe?"

"Yes sir, real sturdy construction, if you've ever tried to crack one."

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"I assume you know that there are four sets of numbers to a Poulard combination? The dial must be spun in the correct sequence to open it and you must start the sequence in the right direction."

Theodore sighed.

"I didn't know whether to start clockwise or counterclockwise with this safe, but my time was limited so I went clockwise and tried the proper sequence with all sorts of numbers from that page you're holding. First I used the top row of numbers. Nothing. Then I tried various combinations from the rows of addition. No luck."

"Did you look at the list of weapons?"

"Yes sir. Suddenly it dawned on me that Lester wasn't too bright and maybe he needed a written reminder on which way to turn the dial. So I tried 38 to the right. If you notice, there's an R in Ruger. Maybe that meant 'Right.' Then I went 45 to the left. Colt doesn't start with an L, but there is an L in it. Could've been code. Then right to 12, 'cause you'll notice there's an R at the beginning of Remington. Thought I had it. Turned left to 16 and the thing was tighter than . . . But, of course there's no L in Hi Standard. Didn't know where to go next. Time ran out. I barely got out of there before Lester came through the front door."

"Be quiet so I can think."

Cletis leaned back in his executive office chair and appeared to focus somewhere up in the dark recesses of the distant ceiling. Almost absentmindedly, his hand stroked the silky strands of his black mustache.

Theodore patiently rested his weight on one short leg then the other. His right foot was almost falling asleep when Cletis suddenly came alive.

"I've got it. See if you can follow me on this. If you punch those top numerals on the page into a phone, I think you'll find it's the telephone number for Morden Bail Bonds in case Lester ran into trouble and needed to contact Herr Morden for instructions. Thus we eliminate that string of numbers. The rows of addition are merely throw-away numbers for camouflage. The 4/3/2/1 is to remind Lester that he needs to rotate the dial 4 times in one direction for the first number, three times in the opposite direction for the second number, twice to the original direction for the third number, and once to the opposite direction on the last number. All your quality safes have similar procedures."

Theodore was confused.

"Then where's the combination?"

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"In the caliber of the guns."

"But I tried that. It didn't work."

"You used the wrong sequence. Think about what we know of Lester, and I presume that Herr Morden followed the same line of reasoning. In the Army, Lester was proficient in only two areas, marching and shooting. And when the Army teaches one to march, the drill instructors always start the recruits out on the left foot. The cadence is Left, Right, Left, Right. Herr Morden knew that, so he wrote out the numbers for Lester to read in that manner. Left 38, right 45, left 12, right 16. Spin the dial the required number of times in the proper direction to each set of numbers and the safe swings open."

"Amazing how you figured that out, sir. May I say I'm impressed."

"Fine, Theodore, and I'll be impressed when you open the safe and bring me the contents."

Theodore was crestfallen.

"You don't mean I have to go back in there?"

"Well, Theodore, once again, I've done all the work and tomorrow *is* our last chance. If I'm right, the hit is set for later that evening. Be sure to take the photo of this page with you to Lester's apartment tomorrow afternoon so as not to forget the combination while you are on the premises."

This time, Theodore was back to the bail bond office in less than two hours. Under his arm, he carried a small package for his boss.

"I brought everything that was in the safe."

Theodore dumped the contents of the package into a mound on top of the desk. Papers, official documents, passports, and banded currency slid out of the pile.

From the heap, Cletis extracted the thin stack of brand-new passports held together with a rubber band and opened them up.

"I see Lester has three different names, one for each passport. As fresh as these are, I suspect our new competitor recently supplied them to Lester. They are rather shoddy as forgeries go, but they should serve Herr Morden's purposes."

Theodore ran his left hand across the top of his crown. The rigid pinky finger on his hand stood straight up.

"I don't understand. Why give Lester bad forgeries?"

Cletis stacked and counted the banded U.S. and foreign currency before continuing the dialogue.

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"And I see that the amount of money is substantial enough to raise questions in the eyes of the authorities, yet is small enough to be an acceptable financial loss to Herr Morden."

"What do you mean?"

"It's throw-away money, Theodore. Herr Morden is setting Lester Cantrell up as a stalking horse to confuse the issue."

"You lost me."

Cletis rummaged through the papers in the pile.

"The United Nations troops are in Bosnia and Macedonia as peacekeepers, but some of the opposing militant factions of those countries would prefer to be at each other's throat to get revenge for atrocities committed by one side or the other over the centuries. Mostly, the common man appreciates the peaceful buffer provided by UN troops, whereas the militants on both sides want the troops gone. If those that support the recently arrested dictator should assassinate the secretary general of the UN and make it appear that the opposition party did it, then the resulting uproar would take a lot of pressure off of the dictator's supporters."

Cletis pulled two official-looking documents off the bottom.

"Here we are. Communications from the opposition party that appear to show Lester as acting in their best interests if he should happen to liquidate the secretary general. It even names a sum of money for the contract. Obvious forgeries, but who will believe the opposition party's denial after the assassination. Lester doesn't know what he's gotten himself into."

"Yeah, but Lester can point the finger at Herr Morden, who you said works for the dictator's party."

Cletis shook his head.

"I don't think Herr Morden plans for Lester to be alive very long after the shooting. Thus there are no witnesses, Herr Morden gets his bail bond security back from the courts when Lester's corpse is eventually found, and he probably also receives a large reward from the dictator's party for services rendered. Very neat, actually."

"We could always tell Lester about the double cross. Maybe he'd take care of Herr Morden for us."

"Much too dangerous of an option. Besides, why should he believe us? No, I have another plan."

Theodore felt a plunging sensation in his stomach as he listened to the plan.

"What we will do is have Moklal Feringheea deliver these two official-looking documents to the opposition party. One, it will keep our new executive secretary out of our way until we have a

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better chance to figure out his personal agenda. And two, the opposition party will immediately recognize the papers as forgeries. I will also include an anonymous note detailing the relationship between Herr Morden and Lester Cantrell. I speculate that the opposition party will then take their own action against Herr Morden."

"I'm with you so far, boss. And the plan for Lester is . . . ?"

"Lester will disappear early this evening, never to be found again. However, before I call my friend the precinct captain to inform him of my suspicions concerning Mr. Cantrell's possible impending departure from the country, evidence will need to be left in Lester's apartment, evidence that indicates a flight to avoid prosecution. I think Xerox copies of his three passports and some airline receipts should do the trick. Plus, with Lester apparently in the wind, Herr Morden will not be able to retrieve his high-dollar security bond back from the court on the gangland slaying. Between losing money and having the opposition party checking into his recent affairs, I believe we will no longer need to worry about the Morden Bail Bond Company cutting into our business."

"Excellent, Mr. Johnston, a very neatly wrapped-up package. By the way, where is Lester really going?"

Cletis Johnston, proprietor of the Twin Brothers Bail Bond Company, almost had the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his face.

"Our company recently acquired a nice ocean-going vessel from one of our past clients. I should think a cruise upon the Pacific would be in order for this time of year. However, we shall have to see if our man Lester has any practice in the art of holding one's breath underwater for, shall we say, a great length of time."

"Well put, sir. And if I may be permitted to ask, how are you causing the manufactured evidence of flight to be left in Lester's apartment followed by his timely disappearance?"

"Me? No, no, Theodore, *I'm* not causing anything. As I informed you before, I've been doing all the work. Now it's your turn again. Best to hurry, you don't have much time. Oh, and Theodore, do be careful out there. If you were caught, it would be rather inconvenient to have any interested law enforcement authorities inquiring about the nature of our monopoly. Any resulting embarrassment could spark a reevaluation of our relationship."

With his mind heavily weighing the personal consequences of

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such circumstances, Theodore turned and slowly headed for the door.

"Yes sir."

"One more thing. Enjoy your weekend cruise with Mr. Cantrell, but be sure you're back in time for work Monday morning. There's a special client coming up that I believe our firm may have an interest in bailing out. It seems that federal officials will soon receive an anonymous letter concerning the actions of the CEO of a prominent pharmaceutical company that has been fraudulently holding back on the necessary production of a patented vaccine in order to artificially increase their selling price. Therefore, I now sense the opportunity for us to conduct some profitable bail business here without the worry of competition. Don't you agree?"

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

It was actually quite a nice axe. I thought it was a shame that at the end of the night I'd have to throw it in the lake.

—Steve Ritchie

From "Dig the Hole First," *AHMM, March 2004*

dighole firstuvwxyzabcj kmnpq

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

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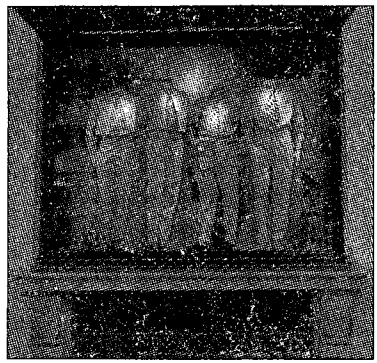
THE STORY THAT WON

The January/February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by David Owens of Alexandria, Virginia. Honorable mentions go to Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Martha Jean Gable of Midland, Texas; David Kingery of Snohomish, Washington; Craig A. Doucette of East Hartford, Connecticut; Milda B. Bee of Raymond, Maine; N. B. Dorman of Chico, California; Charles Richard Laing of Newark, New Jersey; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; and Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina.



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DEAD AHEAD

DAVID OWENS

My neighbor staring out at me gave me the willies, especially four of him and a year after his death. The Sharp Dressed Man's show window featured four mannequins, each with the same shirt, tie, trousers, and head. Even the scar was there on the bottom lip where Carlos had caught a cleat in the mouth playing goalie.

He'd been too handsome for his own good. My longtime friend died on the operating table, dropped by an irate husband's bullet in the chest.

I phoned his mother back in Virginia. "Mrs. Aguilar, this is Craig. I have a question that I'm uncomfortable asking but I must. Did you give anyone permission to use Carlos's features on store mannequins?"

"Why would I do something like that?"

"You wouldn't. I know that. Yet, I'm here on Park Avenue in New York City looking at four mannequins, each with a face that *is* Carlos. What is the name of the outfit in Baltimore that transported Carlos's head to the cryonics storage facility in the Southwest?"

"Reanimation Transit, and they are agents for Immortality Inc. in Arizona, so they collected all the fees."

I phoned the NYPD. Reanimation Transit shared floor space with the Life-like Mannequin Company in Baltimore and was never an agent for Immortality Inc. The interstate component brought in the FBI.

The heads at Sharp Dressed Man were seized as evidence.

Mrs. Aguilar's heart is broken. Her son's head was never shipped to Arizona. Its whereabouts remain unknown.

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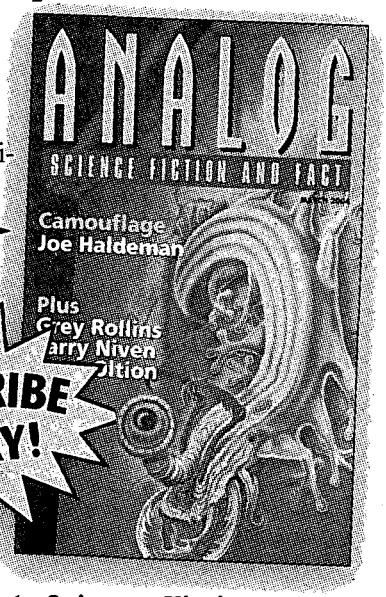

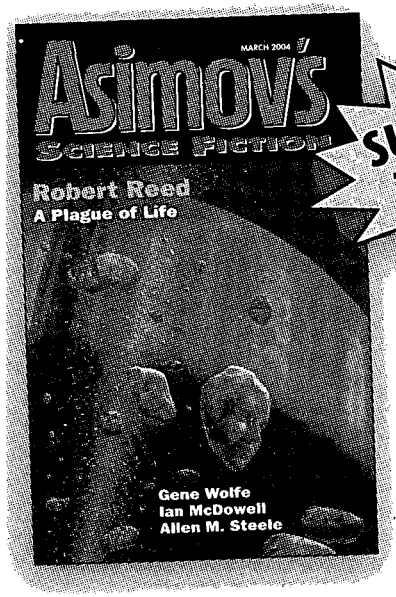

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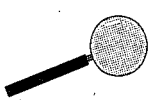

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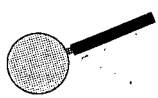

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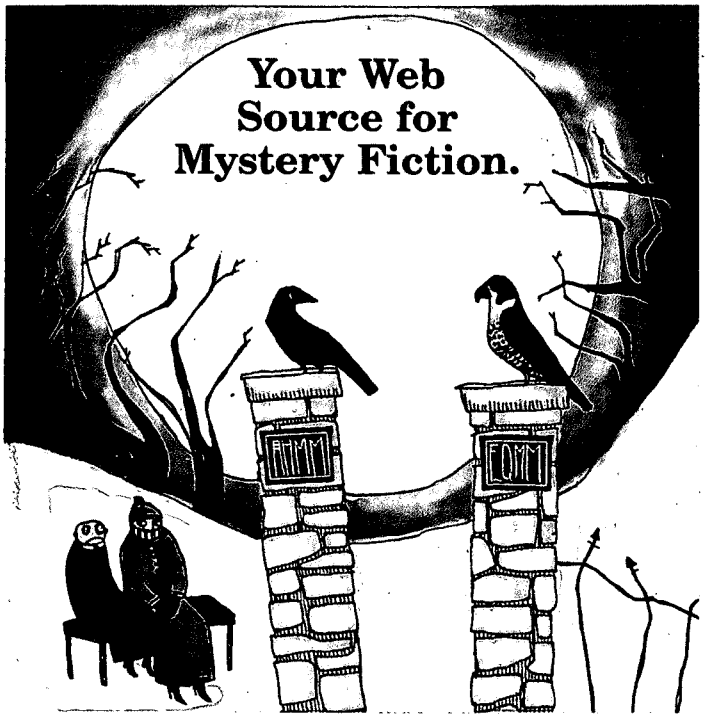

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